

A Chance Encounter

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Summary: Hiccup is lost. Elsa is looking for something. A chance encounter between them has far-reaching consequences.

1. Interlude

****Disclaimer:**** I do not own the recognizable characters, places and situations in this fic. I do not make profit from it, either.

****Notes:**** This fic is a result of DLP's, 'Fight Club: DLP edition'. I was challenged to ... well, that will become apparent soon enough.

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****A Chance Encounter****

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"I'm still not sure about this, Elsa."

"Relax, Anna." Elsa said, rolling her eyes. Both women were dressed like the royalty they were, only that Anna wore a regal blue dress with silver trimmings, and Elsa was clad in hunting gear, with a fur coat over it, all colored white. Elsa's outfit was made for agility and sturdiness, while Anna's was for the castle hallways.

Elsa's flowing hair was blond, light enough that it could barely be distinguished from white, and pulled in a tight braid, fit for travel.

"It's not the first time I've gone." Elsa reminded her sister.

"Yes but, you're the Queen." Anna retorted, worry coloring her voice. "You can't be gone from the castle."

"The castle and the kingdom will be fine if I'm gone for a few days." Elsa replied. "We have this conversation every time I go, and every time I tell you the same thing. I have-"

"_Have_ to go north. It just calls you." Anna recited in a drawl, glaring at her sister. "So you've said, many times."

They'd reached the courtyard of the castle. An entire squad of soldiers on horseback waited for them there, dressed in furs in preparation for the cold of the northern mountains. The trip itself was something that Elsa insisted on, and the guards were what Anna insisted on. Her overprotective streak had not diminished in the four years since Elsa's coronation. Rather, it had only grown once Elsa had settled into her duties to the kingdom of Arendelle.

"Look at all the guards coming with me. I'll be fine." Elsa assured the princess. Seeing her bite her lip to stifle another argument, she drew Anna in a hug. The princess clung to her tightly.

"Don't be so dramatic," Elsa admonished, feeling slightly embarrassed that her sister was making such a fuss over a few days' stroll.

"Just be safe, okay? No risks."

"Yes, I promise. Now will you please let me go? People are watching." That was enough for Anna to release her, a flush to her cheeks. She nodded and took a step back.

Elsa turned, climbed on the saddle of the horse prepared for her, and looked back at her sister while she took the reins.

"Don't worry." She repeated in a soothing voice as she could. "Nothing will go wrong." To emphasize her point, she raised her hand, and ice snaked around it, growing and turning, not settling into any shape. It was a reminder of Elsa's abilities, of the danger she could pose to anyone threatening her or hers.

Nothing could go wrong.

Anna nodded. "I'll see you when you get back."

That seemed to be the signal, and the two lines of soldiers started trotting forwards, Queen Elsa in the middle of the procession.

"I'll be back in a few days." She called behind her as they left the castle, the gates closing with an ominous creaking noise, heading for the northern mountain pass.

** ~~E~~**

The snowstorm was in full swing. Winds howled powerfully, carrying snow and hail, making visibility extremely low and flight extremely dangerous.

The last point was particularly relevant, considering the great beast that was flapping its wings madly, just so it wouldn't be swept away by the strong winds.

>On its back, a figure was wrapped in furs, squinting through his

metal helmet, trying to see what was in front and below them.<p>

"We can't stay in this storm any longer." He yelled, leaning forward. His voice barely reached the ears of the dragon, such were the winds. A grunt was its only reply.

The rider leaned to the side, looking down. His left foot, vastly different from the right in that it was not covered with a boot, rather being an elaborate metallic prosthetic, was constantly in motion, stepping forward and backwards, directing a set of cables crisscrossing the dragon's harness. One such cable ended on the dragon's tail, directing the prosthetic tailfin in perfect synchronization with the natural one.

"Try to land in that clearing over there!" The rider yelled at the top of his voice. The dragon's head swiveled to look where its rider was pointing, and started a controlled glide towards it.

An impossibly long half hour later, the great black dragon landed on the clearing, amidst the tall trees. Thankfully, the snowstorm did not reach that deep into the forest, the tall and sturdy trees forming a barrier.

As soon as the dragon landed, the rider climbed down from its left side, prosthetic unlatching softly, and he landed in the snow. He removed the heavy fur from around him, revealing an outfit of dark brown leather, along with a set of lightweight, black, metal armor pieces.

As the dragon got familiar with their temporary shelter, the rider stood, tested the ground with his prosthetic, and looked around. His metal helmet was long, with only two narrow slits for eyes, and the whole ensemble struck quite the imposing figure.

The rider reached up and removed his helmet, revealing a head of messy brown hair, nearly reaching his shoulder. In a clearly habitual move, the man reached a gloved hand and run it through his hair, straightening it somewhat, and rolling the end of his braid between his fingers. That hair, that face, and those vivid green eyes could only belong to Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third.

"We've really done it this time, Toothless." Hiccup sighed. A low warble from the dragon replied to him.

"Hey, you're not blaming this on me!" Hiccup narrowed his eyes at his reptile companion. Toothless' form settled on one edge of the clearing, rotating slowly to pad the ground to an acceptable level. As he turned, he looked at Hiccup, face clearly annoyed and ears flat in exasperation. He snorted before returning to padding the ground.

"Okay so maybe it was my idea to head for the mountain pass, but we were so lost! Still are, I might add. It was your idea to keep flying once that storm hit. Do you deny it?"

Toothless let out a throaty, dismissive sound. A small stream of fire at the ground and he was satisfied, finally settling in and wrapping his wings around himself. He plopped his head on top of his two forepaws, and closed his eyes in contentment. He opened one eye lazily and raised his right wing just so, in invitation. Hiccup

sighed.

"Yeah, yeah. But you're not off the hook yet, mister." The twenty year old threatened, waving a gloved finger menacingly. He checked the gearbags hanging on the saddle, but did not remove it. They needed to be able to take off at a moment's notice, in case they were attacked by wild beasts or the storm suddenly cleared. He didn't even remove the sheathed sword hanging on his right hip.

Toothless snorted again, both eyes closed. Hiccup settled by his side, and wrapped the furs around himself. The wing closed over him, and before he knew it, he was asleep.

***~H~~**

"What's the holdup?" Elsa demanded. It was three days into their journey, and they had reached deep into the northern mountains. Elsa's elation at the frozen environment had not been marred yet, as her powers had been enough to protect her and her entourage from the sudden and fierce blizzard that struck the previous day. They had taken shelter for the night, and the blizzard had subsided by morning, so they were once again making their way through the snowy mountains. The weather was now cloudy, but there were no chances of further blizzards.

"Apologies, my Queen." the captain of her protection detail bowed in front of her. They had stopped thirty minutes ago, and Elsa had yet to receive an adequate explanation.

"Don't apologise, captain. Rather, tell me why we stopped, and where half of our group went."

"Yes, milady. A forward scout reported a dangerous animal an hour ago. We simply want to make sure you will be in no danger."

Elsa frowned. "An animal? What kind?"

"The scout reported a dragon, milady."

Elsa's eyebrows rose and her eyes widened. A dragon? There hadn't been a dragon in the Arendelle kingdom for generations, and the populace was thankful for that, not to mention prosperous.

"He is sure?"

"Yes, my queen. It was sleeping. I've sent my men to put it down before we proceed."

Elsa frowned again and opened her mouth to say something before she thought better of it and stopped. Dragons of legend had been terrible creatures, tearing a path of fire and destruction through their kingdom. Their reappearance could only mean bad things for her and her subjects.

She gave a curt nod and settled back in her saddle, waiting impatiently.

***~E~~**

Hiccup awoke, his eyes snapping open but he made no other move. He

felt Toothless' subtle nudge with his snout, and the way Hiccup sensed the dragon's muscles tense could only spell trouble.

"What is it, bud?" He murmured under his breath. His hand closed over the handle of his sword, and he reached for his helmet, placing it softly over his head. Toothless motioned with his snout, pointing towards the woods.

Hiccup strained his ears to listen and squinted to look at the darkness of the trees.

"I hear them." He murmured again. And he did. Faint crunches of twigs on the snow bed, the slow rustle of weapons and armor. Whoever they were, they were not being as sneaky as they thought, and not nearly as sneaky as they should have been if they thought to sneak up on a dragon. Hidden as he was under Toothless' wing, they probably had not seen him.

"Be ready." Hiccup growled, muscles tensing. Toothless let out a low rumble of agreement, and his limbs moved in preparation to rise and pounce. The grunt of exertion, and the whistle of something flying through the air were their signal. Hiccup sprang up, foot already on the stirrups and body swinging into place on the saddle. While he did this, Toothless himself sprang to his feet, quickly sidestepping to the left. Where he previously lay, a long hunting spear buried itself into the ground.

Hiccup saw the deadly projectile, and his resolve immediately steeled. Whoever they were, they did not even attempt to communicate before using lethal force. No one--no one-- would kill Toothless, Hiccup would not allow it.

He looked around through the slits in his helmet, and saw several enemies springing though the trees, long spears and swords in their hands. The small clearing was a disadvantage for the dragon rider, and though Toothless would usually make short work of such mundane enemies, such a number would, sooner or later, manage to sneak a spear or sword through the dragon's defenses.

Toothless roared angrily, and the soldiers paused.

"Up, Toothless." Hiccup commanded briskly. The Night Fury unfolded his wings, and before the soldiers could do anything else, he was gone, rocketing up into the air, thankfully free of blizzards.

As they sprang from the treetops, he and Toothless levelled their flight, and Hiccup took stock of their surroundings.

"There!" He pointed out. Just over the end of the woods, another group of soldiers were huddled together, and a few of them were leading a number of horses away.

Hiccup was just about to order Toothless to fly away from those savages, when something caught his eye. Amidst the soldiers was a woman. His vision was something he was proud of, so he was able to make her out. The fact that a woman was among the soldiers was weird in and of itself, but she seemed to be dressed in all white and ... no furs? Was she insane? No fur coat in this cold?

Hiccup himself repressed a shiver. His own furs were tragically lost

in the clearing.

"Take us closer bud. There's something I wanna see."

Toothless grumbled but complied, turning their flight for a pass above the second group.

~~H~~

The anticipation was finally broken when a terrifying roar broke the silence of the mountain. Elsa did not manage to repress a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold.

"What was that?" She asked, though she was perfectly aware of just what it was. Her captain looked just as uncertain as she felt, and he opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out of it.

Something broke out of the treetops in the distance, a black shape that kept rising and rising, until great leathery wings stretched, and it levelled out into the air. Another roar broke the silence.

"Dragon!" Her captain yelled, and her soldiers took their formation around her for protection. They sent the horses away, for they were already on the verge of panic.

The dragon seemed to be flying away, but it suddenly changed direction and came straight towards them, losing some altitude as it did so. Each flap of its powerful wings brought it ever closer, much faster than any of them had imagined.

"It's coming this way!" One of her soldiers yelled, fear etched into his voice and features. Elsa took in the sight of the beast, black as night, with four limbs with wicked claws, bat like wings, and teeth that glinted in the morning sun. Its furious green eyes could be seen even from this distance.

>She removed her gloves, fully prepared to defend herself and her subjects.
Strangely, the dragon did not go any lower than the height of the treetops, even after it had left the forest behind. It levelled again, and though it was flying towards them, Elsa doubted that it was an interception course.

>"Archers!" Her captain commanded, and a third of her guards broke off from the rest of the group and rushed forward, assuming firing position and loading their arrows.<p>

When they deemed the beast within range, the captain yelled for the archers to fire. The arrows loosed, and a rain of steel and death headed for the dragon's path.

The beast saw the danger, however, and managed at the last minute to barrel roll to the left, folding its wings on itself and then unfolding them again as it left the path of the arrows. Elsa narrowed her eyes. As the dragon was rolling, its back was visible for a split second, and she could have sworn that she'd ... seen something there. Some shape, and something glinting in the sun.

After it completed its dodge, the dragon roared in outrage and flapped its wings to gain altitude. Just as it was about to be lost into the clouds it changed direction, and almost free fell towards the ground. It was so fast! An unholy screeching filled the air, born

of what, she did not know, for the dragon's mouth was closed.

Elsa saw the creature's trajectory, falling almost straight towards the group of archers, and realized what was about to happen a split second before it did.

Her magic leapt from her hands, at the same time as the ball of fire left the dragon's mouth. The magic formed a dome of ice, as resistant as she could make it at such short notice, around her soldiers. The dragon unfolded its wings, catching the wind and changing direction just as the ball of fire impacted her ice barrier.

The ground shook as her ice barrier shattered, but the fire disintegrated and her soldiers were mostly unharmed, some shards of ice unfortunately striking some of them. As the dragon passed above them, she sent a stream of frost, hoping to freeze the beast whole. The incoming threat was noticed, however, and the beast evaded, her powers only catching onto the edge of its left wing.

The dragon's head zeroed in on her, and as it was turning with difficulty and struggling to stay level with its half-frozen wing, she got a good look at its back. A gasp left her throat; there was someone there! A man was riding the dragon! And those glints that she'd thought she'd seen, had been the sun shining against the harness that was around the dragon.

She rounded on her captain. "You said it was a wild dragon." She hissed at him. "Why is there a rider on it?"

The captain looked between her and the dragon, confusion etched on his face. Elsa repressed a sigh. Maybe she shouldn't be too hard on him. The captain was good at his job, but thinking deeply was not his strong point.

"I don't know your highness, but it's coming this way!"

Indeed, the dragon had completed its turn and was flying back towards them. The frost on the edge of its wing had been broken, but Elsa had not seen how. Her eyes inspected everything she could, from the glints of metal that she spotted, to the flash of red on its tail. The rider could be seen, at least part of him. All she could see was brown, and a metallic helmet with no characteristics.

The archer group had scattered, but the dragon released another insanely fast, blue fireball towards them. She was ready though, and the ice barrier had already formed on the fire's path, stronger than the one before. In contrast to her stronger defense, the fireball seemed weaker. As if ... a distraction!

She snapped her eyes back to the dragon, and saw that it had not stopped flying towards them and that it was now almost directly above them. She saw, to her great horror, the rider. He was sitting up straight in the saddle, a bow in his hands, arrow notched and aimed directly at her.

A split second later, the arrow was released, and all Elsa could do was to throw her arms forward and release her ice magic directly in front of her, hoping it would be enough to save her. Her eyes closed reflexively.

When she opened them again, two seconds later, the dragon had flown past them, and there was an arrow, perfectly frozen in place a few centimeters in front of her nose.

The realization that she had almost died to the rider's ploy flooded her, and anger welled up inside her.

"Captain." She commanded. The man, who had been following the dragon with his eyes, turned to look at her. "Take your men and head for the trees. You will be safe there."

"My Queen, we swore to protect you."

"There is nothing you can do against this foe. Go now or I will freeze you and transport you there myself. That is an order!"

The captain gulped, but her glare and direct order silenced him from saying anything else. He nodded briskly and relayed the command to his men. They looked anxiously at their queen, but she was not looking at them. Her eyes were locked on the dragon and its rider, who were now gaining altitude, no doubt for another attack pass.

Her eyes grew as cold as the snow around her, and an aura of frost radiated from her. Ice slowly formed under her feet, and a column of ice rose from the ground, carrying her higher and higher. Frost swirled around her fists, as she glared at her attempted killer.

She was no longer seventeen and unable to control her powers. If the dragon rider thought he could take on the Snow Queen, he was in for a very cold surprise.

~~E~~

Hiccup realized what a bad idea it had been to head towards the group as soon as he saw the archers prepare to fire, even though Toothless had done nothing aggressive. In hindsight, he understood that they would not have been able to tell an aggressive dragon from a friendly one.

He had approached the group hoping to get a good look at the woman, and maybe even land and solve the misunderstanding. Both he and Toothless had seen the group of archers at about the same time, and Hiccup ordered "Dodge!". Toothless veered wildly to the left, rolling to present a smaller target and make his change in direction easier.

They managed to evade the volley, if barely, and Hiccup seethed. Once again, those strangers had tried to kill him and Toothless. They would not get away with it. No one killed dragons needlessly in his presence. That went double for his best friend and life companion. Those people had signed their own death warrants with this unprovoked attack.

"Toothless, attack vector."

The Night Fury grunted in agreement, and they gained altitude, as they had done countless times before. When Hiccup deemed their height acceptable, he urged Toothless downwards. The telltale sound of their signature move was music to Hiccup's ears, as they zeroed in on the offending group of archers. Toothless released his fireball and

immediately opened his wings to cut their drop.

Hiccup followed the fire's trajectory with his eyes. He always watched the people he killed as they died, if he could. Not out of sadism, but to remind himself of the consequences of his actions. That killing was a choice, and a choice that he had decided to make every time, and that his victims, no matter who they were, deserved at least to have someone watch them die.

To his great surprise, he saw a stream of white head for the archer group and suddenly, ice sprung from the ground, intercepting the fireball before it got to them. The attack exploded and the barrier shattered, but it had done its job. The archers had survived.

Hiccup's eyes followed the stream's path to the source, and his eyes widened when he saw the white-clad woman unleash another beam of frost, aiming at them this time!

"Go right!" He urged his friend, and Toothless complied. They managed to avoid the worst of the attack, but some of it touched Toothless' wing, which immediately froze over, tearing a painful yell from the Night Fury. Dragon and rider alike glared at the woman as they passed overhead, as Toothless fought to remain in the air with his left wing half frozen.

'Sorcery_!' Hiccup cursed inwardly. He hadn't seen a magic user in quite a bit, and never one who could do something like this. To Toothless, he said "Breathe on the ice." The dragon did so, and the thin sheet of ice thawed. Toothless shook his wing to clear it of the last traces of the woman's magic.

'What would have happened if we'd been fully hit by that?' Hiccup wondered, although he knew the answer. They would have completely frozen and fallen to their deaths. The woman, the sorceress, had tried to kill them, too. She would have to die, as well. But she, unlike the soldiers, was an actual threat.

"Make another pass at the archers, and then immediately head for the sorceress. Try to give me a clear shot." Hiccup instructed his friend, and the Night Fury snorted in a distinctly positive way that the viking had years before associated with the word 'yes'. He untied his bow from where it lay on the right saddlebag, and drew an arrow from the quiver next to it.

The plan worked, for the most part. Their second pass on the archers drew another barrier from the sorceress, and though they were prepared to dodge another attack aimed at themselves, it didn't come. Hiccup's aim, perfected over years of unerring synchronization with Toothless, had been spot on. The sorceress was nevertheless saved, barely managing to freeze his arrow before it hit her. Hiccup cursed as he led Toothless away, clear of the woman's magic and seeking to gain altitude.

When they turned again, they saw that the soldiers had left the woman and headed for the cover of the trees. The woman herself was rising, standing atop an ever-growing ice column, visibly emitting an aura of frost. She seemed livid, seething.

Good.

"Be ready to dodge. We can't be hit again." He warned the dragon, and

received an ear-slap in return, along with a grumble. "Just checking." He pacified his friend.

They were approaching the woman now, who had lifted herself above the treetops using only her ice. She watched them approach, and when she deemed them at close enough range, unleashed her powers. White streams of ice and frost headed straight for them and their intended path, too fast for most dragons to dodge.

Toothless was not most dragons.

With the elegance and ease associated only with the Night Fury itself, he weaved between the rivers of magic, not letting a single one graze him. After he had reached an acceptable shooting distance, he unleashed a fireball. It was not aimed at the sorceress herself, but rather, at the column beneath her feet. The ice shattered, but she had already jumped off it. Instead of a fall to her death, she stepped lightly on another pillar of ice, created almost instantly and branching off from the base of the first one, and kept up her assault.

As Toothless flew past the woman, too fast for her to freeze him, Hiccup unleashed another arrow. She was ready for it this time, and the arrow stopped, frozen in its tracks, meters away from her.

Toothless put some distance between them, still evading the beams of ice magic that rained down around them.

"Pelt her fast!" Hiccup instructed, and when Toothless turned back towards the woman, he began unleashing low powered fireballs that, while relatively weak, would still deal some damage and could be fired at regular intervals. In defense, the woman created three layers of elaborate ice barriers in front of her. When the third was about to break under the Night Fury's assault, she jumped off her ice pillar. Rather than creating another ice column to step on, she created an uneven path, sliding gracefully on as she created it in front of her and thus propelling herself wherever she wanted.

Hiccup saw the danger when he woman began creating an ice slide and headed directly towards them, unleashing more frost, and urged Toothless to turn and put distance between them.

"We have to fight her from afar. If she hits us, we're done." He warned. Toothless let out a frustrated growl, but it was more a token resistance than anything else. Again, they weaved between the sorceress' streams of ice, but this time putting distance between them was not as easy, for she was following them up in their air, using her powers to create ice on which to step and slide on.

They dodged as best they could, and managed to not get hit.

Hiccup, who had been keeping a careful eye on their surroundings, noticed the gathering clouds and the snow rising from ground level.

"Thor almighty." He swore, as the blizzard was reborn, this time summoned by the Ice Sorceress. He chanced a look behind them, and saw an expression of fierce concentration on her pale face, dashed with just the right amount of anger. She was close enough for Hiccup to

make out some details about her, such as her nearly-white blond hair, her young and beautiful face, and the small but impressive circlet on her hair.

>However, this was not the time for admiring his enemy. There would be time for that later, maybe. The snowstorm was picking up, now, and their visibility was dropping. Hiccup chanced a guess that their opponent would not be hindered at all by the storm, but Toothless' flight would be impaired. Soon, she would catch up to them, and that was not good. He needed a plan.<p>

"Hide in the clouds, bud. She provided us with a blizzard: let's use it."

Toothless grunted his assent, and then broke from the previous path, heading upwards, closer to the clouds that were spawning the snow and hail. A few seconds later, they vanished in them.

The tables had turned.

~~H~~

Elsa cursed under her breath when she saw the infuriating dragon vanish. Her blizzard had worked so far, in that it had slowed them down and allowed her to almost catch up to them. The snow and hail had made it harder for them to dodge her attacks, but before she could nail them with something, they had changed course and headed straight for the clouds, summoned for her snowstorm. After a brief hesitation, she followed them. The snow and hail did not touch her, and the cold never bothered her, but her visibility was just as hindered as theirs must have been.

The moment she lost sight of them, she never found them again. She flew around inside the clouds, looking for the telltale shape of the dragon. A minute later, she heard the terrifying screech again, and saw a faint flash on her left. She turned quickly, and sent a surge of magic from her hands, instantly creating a barrier of solid ice to block the incoming fireball. The fire smashed against her barrier, and she caught the briefest glimpse of the dragon's shape before it vanished back into the cover of the clouds.

She was forced to block again and again, as she was pelted with fire from every possible angle, and though it angered her that she was so cornered, she could not help but admire the dragon's speed and agility.

In the end, she realized that her blizzard was having a negative effect, and released her magic over it. The snow fell slowly to the ground, and no more followed it. The heavy, dark clouds vanished back into the air, and the sky cleared a little bit. She could see better now, but the day was still cloudy by itself, and she had no way of completely dispersing them.

Through the remaining clouds her opponents appeared, and once again she was pelted with a barrage of fireballs before she could launch her own attack. She formed her shield again, this time aiming to redirect the attacks away from her rather than blocking them directly. It seemed to do the trick, for the fireballs blasted off of her shield but didn't explode, and her shield did not shatter like the others. She was preparing to go on the offensive, when the ice beneath her feet shattered. She realized that one of the blasts must

have been aimed for her foothold, but didn't think any more on this as she plummeted from the sky.

She let out a horrified cry as she fell, trying to create ice to slide on, but she was turning too fast, and was too terrified to concentrate correctly. She caught a glimpse of the dragon, and saw the flash of the rider's bow. She had the presence of mind to swing her hands, and a stream of frost along with it, which redirected the arrow's path so that instead of running her through, it merely flew an inch next to her face.

She managed to bring her fear under control and level herself as she fell, which enabled her to create ice beneath her and try to slow and redirect her fall.

>It worked, for the most, and she managed to create a slide that cut enough momentum that when she crashed into the bed of snow she wasn't killed.<p>

She picked herself off the snow, spitting it out of her mouth and wiping it out of her eyes. She was disoriented, and her stomach was weak from the fall, but she knew that she had to find the dragon, or she would soon be dead.

She rose to her feet unsteadily, and shook her head, ridding it of leftover snow and bringing the world back into focus. Her eyes scanned the sky to locate the dragon, as she rotated in place to look everywhere around her. The unholy screeching was her warning that the attack was incoming.

There!

Ice leapt to her hands as she spotted the dragon, flying towards her from the west at full speed, its face locked in a visage of fierce determination.

>She saw the fireball that left its mouth. It was bigger than any she had seen before. But she was ready, and ice was hers to command. The ground in front of her rose at her command, forming the strongest, sturdiest barrier of ice she had yet made. The blast hit her barrier, and both exploded. She had to cover her face with her hands and turn to the side from the strength of the blast, but she didn't feel anything reach her. She had done it!<p>

She opened her eyes again and looked beyond her wrecked barrier, catching sight of the dragon as it was flying away and turning slowly, wings extended. Something was wrong. Something was ... Where is the rider? She thought frantically. The saddle on the dragon's back was empty!

She looked around wildly, trying to locate her cunning enemy. She heard a faint whistle of air, and looked to its source, eastwards. What she saw left her dumbfounded for a second, hesitation that cost her. The rider was gliding under his own power, small leathery surfaces between his extended hands and torso, and he was heading directly towards her at frightening speed. He was almost upon her!

Before she had time to even raise her hands, the gliding rider reached her. He slammed into her with the force of a boulder, and they both tumbled in the snow, falling down the side of the mountain.

Elsa was not used to physical battles of any kind, and she quickly lost her bearings at the rough tumbling. She landed harshly, and the rider landed atop her. Her head throbbed painfully, and her eyes were clenched shut from disorientation and pain. She could feel the weight of her enemy settle on top of her, pinning her hands down with one of his own, holding them together.

She felt something cold touch her neck, and only then did she open her eyes. She saw the rider's frightening helmet with no characteristic besides the slits, and she felt the knife's edge on her throat. How crazy was this man? Did he free fall out of his dragon? Who does that, any of that?

>"Don't move." The rider commanded harshly. His voice was deep, and muffled by the metallic helmet. She dared not move, she dared not speak, she could hardly *think*.

"If I feel your ice anywhere, I will slit your throat." He threatened, and his voice got even harsher, causing Elsa to flinch.

"And even if you can freeze me before I kill you, Toothless will," he noted and nudged his head to the side. Elsa saw, through her peripheral vision, that the dragon had landed near them and was watching her carefully. She did not doubt her captor's words.

"Okay?" He asked, to make certain she understood him. Elsa absently thought that his accent was quite weird, but she could understand him perfectly. She nodded imperceptibly.

She had regained her bearings, and the pain in her head had subsided. She could fully process the situation now.

"If you plan to kill me," She told him coldly. She would not give him the satisfaction of submitting. "Do so now. I will not allow myself to be taken hostage for ransom."

"Kill you?" The rider asked, incredulity in his voice. "Are you crazy, woman? You and your people tried to kill us, we don't even know you."

"You tried to kill the archers. You tried to kill me. You have me on knife point." Elsa pointed out, her courage returning.

"The archers would have killed us if we hadn't dodged. As would you. As would your soldiers in the forest. What did we do to you? Why did you attack us?"

"You ride a dragon." She pointed out, condescension in her voice as if to a small child. "Beasts that lay waste to all they go through. My soldiers thought you a danger to me, and tried to protect me."

"Not another one." The rider said, frustration in his voice. The knife in her neck had drawn a single drop of blood by now, and she felt it slide down the side of her neck. The dragon snorted aggressively on the side, but the rider ignored it. "Dragons are not mindless beasts. This dragon did nothing to you, and you tried to kill him again and again without provocation. And you have the nerve

to assume the moral high ground?"

No one had spoken like that to Elsa, ever. And what he said ... could he be telling the truth? Had they attacked unprovoked and thus only forced the dragon and rider to defend themselves?

"You seem like a reasonable sort, and I'd hate to kill you." The rider continued. His voice had softened from its steely edge, and Elsa found that it sounded almost ... pleasant. "So, do you promise to be good if I remove this knife from your throat?"

A heavy question. Elsa could feel the cold edge of the knife digging on her neck. What choice did she have? She was at his mercy, and he offered to spare her life.

"I do."

Immediately the weight lifted off of her, and the knife vanished from her throat. She released the breath she didn't know she was holding, and looked up. The rider had stood, towering above her. He replaced the knife in a fold of his brown leather outfit, and reached with his right hand to remove his helmet. Underneath the featureless helmet lay a mess of long brown hair, a pleasant and slightly scarred face with a big nose, and a pair of vivid green eyes, peering at her guardedly. A scar ran from his left cheek to the center of his nose. Looking lower, she noticed that his left foot was an elaborate metallic prosthetic, but she couldn't see where prosthetic ended and where flesh began.

His free hand was extended towards her, an offer in more ways than one.

She reached for it, and the stranger hauled her to her feet, less gently than she would have liked. Hiding her scowl at the rough treatment, she stood in front of him, taking in his appearance and trying to think of something to do or say, acutely aware of the terrifying dragon standing a few feet to her left.

In lieu of saying anything else, she opted to introduce herself.

"I am Elsa, Queen of Arendelle." She said, with as much formality as she could, extending her hand as she would to a foreign dignitary. She saw surprise in his eyes, as she expected, but then she saw mirth, which she did not. A small grin appeared on the stranger's face that completely ruined his threatening posture. He caught her hand in his gloved one and shook it strongly.

"I am Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, Chief of the Vikings of Berk." He introduced himself. Elsa did not think of the strangeness of the name, too caught up in the consequences of his revelation. He was a leader too. They had attacked the chief of a Viking tribe unprovoked. She, personally, had nearly killed the leader of a Viking tribe, and perhaps even worse, had failed at her attempt.

"And this is Toothless," he said as he released the handshake, pointing with his thumb over to the dragon. Elsa followed his gaze and shivered. The dragon looked incredibly menacing and ready to pounce, and he was definitely not toothless.

"He may seem like a really dangerous beast, but he's really just a big, soft lizard that-"

He didn't finish his sentence, because the dragon had cuffed him upside the head with the end of its tail. Hiccup rubbed the sore spot, and glared at his dragon, completely ignoring Elsa for now.

He raised his hand, and shook a gloved finger at his companion. "What have I told you about interrupting me when I talk politics, you useless reptile?" He admonished.

Elsa could not help it. She burst into laughter.

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2. Elsa 1

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A Chance Encounter, Chapter 2

~HE~

As soon as it happened, Elsa realized her faux pas and did her best to reign in her laughter. She managed it, and after a final giggle at the absurdity of the situation, brought herself under control. The brown haired rider had stopped scolding his dragon and instead looked at her, a smile playing on his own lips.

He stood up straighter, and he was nearly a head taller than Elsa herself. He shuffled the helmet held under his arm to a better grip, and Elsa's eyes were drawn to it. She almost flinched when her gaze landed on the featureless mask, her mind's eye flashing back to the incoming fireballs, or the arrow barely frozen inches away from her head.

No, she could not afford to let her guard down, even if the rider did not seem hostile any longer. Nevertheless, she was a Queen, and she would act like one.

As she schooled her features, so did the rider, and they were both back to assessing each other.

"You have my official apologies, Chief Haddock, for this unprovoked attack on your person." She began, keeping her voice level and steady. She saw the rider frown, but he didn't interrupt her. "It was a misunderstanding that was completely our fault, and I apologize once again for it. We have shown you are our worst, let us show you our best. Please accept my invitation to the capital of my kingdom, and to my own castle, where we may repay you this disservice."

The dragon rider's brow furrowed even further, and his back straightened from its casual leaning. When he spoke, his own voice carried an air of authority that Elsa recognized from her own 'Queen speech'.

"I accept your apologies, but I am afraid I must decline your

invitation."

"If you are in a hurry of course we will understand, but please consider-"

"I am not in a hurry." Haddock cut her off, and Elsa closed her mouth, trying to keep her temper from flaring. The only one who interrupted her and got away with it was her sister, and this man was not her sister. "I am not expected back for several weeks yet."

"Then, what seems to be the problem?"

"With all due respect Queen Elsa, I'm not sure I want any more of your hospitality." He said, his voice dripping with sarcasm at the end. Elsa grit her teeth, and closed her eyes for a second to compose herself further. Her cheeks reddened from both shame and anger. Anger because he just insulted her, her integrity, and her kingdom, and shame because, for all he knew and for all she had shown so far, he was right. She had to find some way to convince him. Even if he had no desire to come, she had to make it up to him somehow.

"You have my word as Queen that no harm will befall you or the dragon while you are my guests and conform to a few basic rules. In fact, I insist. My honor compels me to compensate you for this unwarranted attack. Please allow me to do so and not return to my castle in shame. As one leader to another, Chief Haddock." She ended with a plea, something she was unfamiliar with, but with her honor at stake, her pride could take a step back.

Haddock rubbed his eyes, and didn't reply for a few seconds, thinking it over. Eventually, he looked her in the eyes again. Elsa was mildly annoyed to note that he had to look down to do so.

"My own honor as chief compels me to not spurn your heartfelt invitation. Very well, I will take your word that we will come to no harm." His eyes pierced her own, and Elsa was acutely aware that he had spared her life not five minutes ago. No, she would not go back on her word.

"However," Chief Haddock said, "Unless you plan on giving me a clan name to call you by, I insist that you call me Hiccup."

"Very well, Chief Hiccup." The way his eye twitched at her skilled evasion brought a smile to her face.

"Fair enough, Queen Elsa." He replied, stressing her title. Unlike him, however, Elsa was not bothered by it.

"The castle is no more than a few days' travel from here. Would you accompany me and my entourage?" A pointless question, both knew. Hiccup had already agreed to come, and the only way to do that was with them, but they both played along with the formalities.

"Of course, Queen Elsa."

With a nod, Elsa turned towards the black beast, who was still watching her every move, expression screaming distrust.

"There is also the matter of the .. dragon." She said slowly, fairly

certain that the dragon would not pounce on her when its rider was talking to her, but not liking to take risks.

"What about him?" Chief Hiccup asked, frowning at her.

"I understand that you are close, but I will have to ask you to part, at least for a little while."

The dragon growled and took a half step forward, crouching. Elsa took a fearful step back, and Hiccup shook his head. "Out of the question," he said. "Toothless goes where I go. We're a package deal."

Elsa looked from the dragon to the rider, trying to work it out in her head. Suddenly, she had an idea. Yes, this would work.

"I'm afraid there is no other choice. Our mounts will flee the moment they see ... Toothless," she forced herself to say the name, having trouble associating the terrifying black dragon with anything as harmless as the name implied. "And without them, we will take weeks to get back, not to mention their worth."

She saw chief Hiccup process this, and hoped that she didn't just force him to rethink coming. Honestly, the horses were not the reason she didn't want the dragon anywhere near her, but it was a good enough reason that Haddock should accept.

Judging by the disappointed look in his face, she was not hiding her intentions as well as she thought. Despite this, chief Hiccup let out a sigh, and said "Alright."

With this, he turned to his dragon, and took a few steps forward, reaching him. Elsa resisted the illogical urge to take hold of his arm and yank him back, away from the beast. He obviously trusted the creature with his life. She knew that if there was anyone the dragon would never hurt, that was his rider.

Chief Hiccup placed his hand on the dragon's snout, and rubbed him gently.

"Toothless." He started, his voice gentle and apologetic. The beast let out an angry snort and pounded his paws on the ground, eyes narrowed and glaring directly at her. Elsa was paralyzed, but Hiccup was holding the dragon back, and even if it pounced, she should be able to freeze him before it got to her.

"Stop that," Hiccup admonished the dragon. "You know she's right." Toothless' eyes snapped to Hiccup, and he let out an irritated warble that, while angry, did not have the tone of rage and denial of his previous outburst.

"Yes, I know we could just leave, but I was invited. What kind of chief would I be if I refused an official invitation from a foreign Queen?"

This was too bizarre for Elsa, but at the same time, so extraordinary that she couldn't look away. He was having a conversation, an honest to god conversation, with the beast!

The dragon's expression softened, and his eyes were downcast. He let

out a pitiful whine from the back of his throat.

"Oh come on. Don't pout, you big baby. What will the Queen think?" Apparently Toothless didn't care what Elsa thought of him, for he continued his pouting and whining. "Fine, I'll buy you a full basket of fish as soon as I can, okay?"

Toothless seemed to consider this, and finally let out two short barks. "Okay," Hiccup said, resigned. "Three baskets. Alright?"

Even Elsa understood the dragon's grunt as grudging acceptance, and Hiccup patted the dragon's head murmuring soft words to him.

"Toothless, you know what we must do now." The black dragon stared at him in what Elsa recognized as confusion, and then his eyes widened, and he shook his head frantically. Hiccup reached with both hands, and pacified the beast.

"I know how much you hate it bud, and trust me I don't want it either. But you know this is the only way. And it's only for a little while. We'll stop often, don't worry."

Toothless resigned himself to his fate and hung his head, letting out a pitiful warble. Elsa nearly, nearly, felt sorry for the terrible beast.

Chief Hiccup moved, going around the dragon and working on the harness. Elsa watched with undisguised interest as he unlatched, untied, and finally removed the saddle, stirrups, and finally the red tailfin at the end of the dragon's tail. Elsa realized what that flash of red that she'd seen earlier was, the dragon had an artificial tailfin!

With the same economy of movement, Hiccup removed the tailfin from the rest of the harness, and repositioned the saddle and stirrups to their earlier position on the dragon's hide. From a saddlebag he retrieved a long piece of folded black leather, that had a mechanism on one end. Elsa didn't see it clearly, and had no idea what it was, but chief Hiccup moved to the end of the dragon's tail, and there placed the contraption, strapping it where the red artificial tailfin had been. Now Elsa realized that this was another artificial tailfin, though she had no idea what the difference between the red and the black one was.

As soon as he was done, Hiccup rose to his feet and urged the dragon to try it out. Toothless looked at his tail, and moved his remaining natural tailfin. The mechanism apparently worked, for the artificial one moved in tandem. Elsa was as surprised at the incredible feet of engineering as she was at the dragon's snarl of disgust, but didn't say anything, knowing that she was missing most pieces of the puzzle, and that it was too early to form an opinion on anything.

Hiccup returned to the saddlebags, and removed another folded contraption. This one was mostly wooden with some metallic pieces on it, and the Viking Chief unfolded it and, raising his left foot with the prosthetic, fitted it around the metallic appendage. The contraption clicked into place with a soft pop, and the viking was satisfied. When he next placed his foot on the ground, it did not sink as it had earlier, but held to the same level as his booted foot

did.

"Go now, bud. Find something to eat, would you? I'll see you when we make camp." Chief Haddock told to the black dragon, and it warbled something in reply, pushing its snout on his chest, before taking a few steps back, crouching, and taking off.

Elsa watched the dragon fly away, higher and higher, aware that she was now alone with Hiccup. She saw the dragon make long circles at cloud level, above their general area of the forest, but it was getting very far away now.

Suddenly remembering her soldiers, she called out towards the woods for them to come out. The quiet of the mountain side carried her words, and she didn't have to yell herself hoarse. Her people started coming out of the woods and approaching them, hurried.

Despite her reassurances, and his own declared belief in her word, she saw chief Hiccup stiffen as he caught sight of the approaching soldiers, and lay a hand on the pommel of his sword.

She was about to say something, but he beat her to it, and his tone was neutral, guarded. "You should know that between me and Toothless, I am the levelheaded one. He does not share my aversion to needless killing. Should anything happen to me, there will be nothing capable of holding him back." Which Elsa translated inwardly to '_Unless you want to die a fiery painful death, you'd better not kill me._'

"Your concern is understandable, Chief Hiccup, but unnecessary." Elsa reassured him as the soldiers reached them, her captain coming to a stop in front of her.

The captain looked between his Queen and the strange man in confusion, having half a mind to point his sword at him and demand an explanation, but held back by his Queen's apparent ease next to him.

When in doubt, defer to the Queen, he always says.

"My Queen?"

"This is Chief Hiccup Haddock, of the Vikings of Berk." Elsa declared. If Hiccup was impressed by her memory, he did not show it in any way. Elsa continued. "He and the dragon Toothless are not enemies. In fact, from here on out, they are my guests, and will be treated as such."

The captain's confusion multiplied, and his head snapped between the strange man, his queen, and the black spot on the sky. Murmuring broke among the soldiers, but none dared speak out.

"As you command, my Queen." Then, turning to Hiccup, he bowed once again. "My lord." He addressed him. Elsa saw, to her amusement, Hiccup stiffen, but not in aggression. If she had to guess, she'd go with embarrassment.

"At ease, please. Hiccup or Chief Haddock will do." He told the gathered guards. The captain looked uncertain. This was not in the protocol he knew.

"... my lord?"

Elsa decided to give the two men a break before the mountain decided to swallow them and save the world from everlasting awkwardness.

"Captain, gather the men and the horses. We ride for Arendelle." Arendelle, besides the name of the entire kingdom, was the name of the capital city as well. The city where her family's castle lay for generations.

"Yes my Queen." The captain said, relief evident in his voice.

Soon, everyone was gathered. The horses had been brought back from their hiding place, and everyone was climbing onto their saddles.

Which presented a new problem.

"And what about chief Haddock, your Highness?" One of her soldiers asked Elsa, once she was safely astride her white horse.

What about him? He doesn't have a horse, and his mount can't exactly walk next to the horses.

She could have him ride with one of her soldiers, but that could be seen as demeaning for someone of his status. He could ride with her, and that would be somewhat improper, but at least it wouldn't be insulting.

"He will ride with me until we find another horse," she made known her decision. The soldiers around her looked scandalized, and her captain looked ready to speak out, but in the end none dared contradict their Queen.

Chief Hiccup himself was frowning at her. She saw his gaze wash over her, and the short space behind her on the horse. At least his contemplative eyes on her did not make her feel sick, like so many others had over the years.

She was broken out of her thoughts when chief Hiccup pointed to a spot behind her, and asked, "What about those?"

Elsa looked where he was pointing, and saw a group of five horses, loaded with supplies for the journey. She frowned as she looked back at the viking chief.

"Those are supply horses. Little better than mules." She had never met a nobleman that would deign to ride a supply horse.

"They'll do. Can you distribute the weight off of one of them?" He asked.

What_? He wanted to ride a supply horse? He preferred riding a supply horse than riding with Elsa? Of course, Elsa was grateful, for she had no wish to share her horse with her would-be killer, but still, it's the principle of the matter.

Letting none of her simmering anger show, she nodded curtly, and motioned for her men to take care of it. Soon, one of the horses had

been cleared of its load, fitted with a spare saddle, and led to them. Chief Hiccup looked at the horse for a few seconds, and then awkwardly climbed on the saddle, settling carefully.

"You don't have much experience with horses, do you?" She asked, hoping it didn't come out condescending or insulting. It mustn't have, for he only shook his head.

"Not many horses where I come from."

Elsa spurred her horse forward, and the procession began, with her and chief Hiccup on the front. He was doing a decent job of controlling the horse, for someone apparently novice at it. How different is it riding to a dragon? Elsa wanted to ask, but decided against it.

"Are you not cold, Chief Hiccup?" She asked him, noting that his leather outfit can't be that fat or insulated. His head whipped to her, and he looked at her with a completely surprised expression for a second. Then, he burst into deep, rumbling laughter.

'What did I say?' Elsa wondered, watching him laugh. The sound was pleasant, and sent a tingle down her spine, but the fact that he was laughing at her was testing her carefully controlled temper. Soon, Hiccup got himself under control, and wiped a couple of tears from his eyes. Surely what I said wasn't this funny? Elsa bristled.

"Apologies, Queen Elsa, you mustn't judge me for laughing." He said once he completely calmed down. Elsa raised an eyebrow at him. "It's just, no one asks if we're bothered by the cold, back home."

"Is it not cold there?" Elsa asked him. She'd thought that the Viking areas were up north, and theoretically it should be very cold there.

"Quite the contrary." Hiccup replied cheerily. "It's freezing.. It snows nine months of the year, and hails the other three."

"But then, why?"

"I laughed because up there, dealing with the cold is the first thing we learn as children. Personally, the cold never bothered me anyway. When I was younger, it wouldn't be surprising to see me running around in a sleeveless tunic, causing havoc." Chief Hiccup said, his tone wistful, and a faraway look in his eyes.

Elsa's mind shut down midway through his reply, and a rush of heat rose up to her cheeks. 'The cold never bothered me anyway' rang through her mind. If Chief Hiccup noticed her reddening cheeks, he didn't say anything. He kept on speaking, and it took Elsa a few seconds to focus back into what he was saying.

"... not to say that we don't get sick if we're not careful, you understand."

Elsa coughed, and, before she embarrassed herself any further, changed the topic. "Tell me more about your provinces, if you would, Chief Hiccup." She asked as they moved forwards Hiccup looked up from his horse to gaze at her.

"Berk?" he asked her, and she nodded.

"What is there to say about Berk?" He asked rhetorically, in the tone of someone gathering his thoughts. "Berk is the name of our main village, which is in an island, far to the north. Technically, our territory covers several islands around the island of Berk. It's full of jutting mountain peaks, steep cliffs, granite formations, and rocky hills. I'm not sure what else to tell you, actually, I guess you have to see it to feel it."

"I ... see." And even though what he told amounted to almost nothing, Elsa could, sort of, see. Freezing environment always appealed to her. She was at home in her castle, certainly, but she'd been equally at home at the top of the north mountain. She did have to give it to him though. A satisfying reply that gave away nothing that could be used against them.

"You must forgive my curiosity," she told him politely, "but we of Arendelle have not seen dragons for centuries. Are they a common occurrence in your lands?"

She watched his face like a hawk, and she was not unrewarded for her vigil. He went completely still in his saddle for a second, before he schooled his features in a mask of carefully cultivated neutrality.

"Is ice magic a common occurrence in yours?" He shot back.

"As far as I know, I am the only one." She replied honestly, taking hidden delight at his surprised expression. He didn't think that she would reply so easily, but Elsa knew that he would know anyway as soon as they reached Arendelle. Her nature was no secret to the populace. She didn't know if Chief Hiccup believed her, but he nevertheless rose to the challenge.

"Toothless is a Night Fury," he informed her, though his tone was guarded and carefully collected. Elsa found the name to be quite ... accurate. "and as far as I know, there is no other Night Fury in all the lands I had traveled in."

So he must be the only dragon rider, Elsa thought. Which made him equally as unique as she was to Arendelle. She wasn't sure what to think of that. He was the leader of his people, and from what little she knew, could relate with her on some respects. And then there was ... no!

She shook her head, to chase away those thoughts. She could still feel the sting of his knife on her throat, the harshness on his voice as he threatened to kill her. The sight of his steel arrow, inches away from piercing her brain. No, she should always keep her guard up, and her magic in preparation.

Although, he had spared her.

She should wait until they reach Arendelle before she makes any sort of judgement, she decided. Until then, she would watch this Chief Hiccup, and glean as much information as she could. It was not completely out of the realm of possibility that this was a ploy, to spy on the inner workings of her kingdom.

"Can I ask you a personal question, Chief Hiccup?"

"You may. I cannot guarantee a reply, however." Elsa tipped her head ever so slightly in acceptance.

"What happened to your leg, if you don't mind me asking?"

Chief Hiccup looked at said prosthetic, looking pensive. Elsa could recognize the look of a person looking back.

"There was a battle." He eventually said.

"The same one that gave you the scar on your cheek?"

"No."

Not very informative, but it had an air of finality, and Elsa knew that she would get nothing else out of him.

"I hope you can tell me one day." Surprising even herself, she meant it. Chief Hiccup looked at her appraisingly, and Elsa met his gaze evenly.

"One day, maybe I will." He allowed, which was more than she had any right to expect.

The atmosphere had turned decidedly somber, and Elsa did not like that.

"It's your turn." She told him. He looked back up at her, mildly surprised.

"Excuse me?"

"It's your turn to ask me a question. It is only fair."

"I suppose . . ."

"So, go ahead."

"How old are you?"

"That's it?" Elsa asked, looking at him sideways. "That's your question?"

"Yes it is."

"Fine, twenty one. How come you're traveling alone?"

"I'm not alone, I have Toothless. How come you're traveling all the way over here at all?"

Curse this man and his weaseling! She inwardly fumed. He'd made her waste a question. "I'm taking a walk, so to speak. The castle can get a bit stuffy at times. Why are you traveling so far away from your people?"

"For the same reason you're taking your strolls, I suppose. I need a break sometimes, and having a dragon means my strolls can take me

pretty far away. Are you an only child?"

"I have a sister, two years younger. How long have you been gone from Berk?"

"A month already. Do you have a pet?"

"No I don't. I have a talking snowman, if he counts. How can you be away for so long? Doesn't Berk need you, as its chieftain?"

This time Haddock took his time in reply, taking his time to formulate it in his head, first. Elsa gave him his time, seeing as they had several days.

"I take care of everything before I leave, and I trust the people I leave in my stead to keep the peace until I am back. Can you help me orient myself, with a map or something similar? I'm afraid me and Toothless are quite lost."

"Certainly. We'll take care of that as soon as we get to the castle. What about your wife, then? Won't she get worried if you go gallivanting on your dragon for months?"

Chief Hiccup actually scowled, and Elsa froze. She cursed herself inwardly for her forwardness and nosiness. But it was so easy to forget that he was a chief, equal in status to her. He looked nothing like the various royals that visited her kingdom over the years from neighboring kingdoms. He was dressed like a warrior, he had a prosthetic foot, traveled alone and he rode a dragon. It was hard to treat him like she had treated everyone else, and her curiosity was driving her mad.

"No wife waiting at home, though plenty of people to worry." Chief Hiccup eventually said. Elsa flushed in embarrassment, cursing her lack of tact again and again.

"My apologies, Chief Hiccup. It's just that as a leader, it is usually expected to take a spouse and establish a line." Chief Hiccup tipped his head in acknowledgement of this.

"True, but this is not the case with me."

"Fair enough."

"What about you, then? Is there a King out there, worrying his beard off that his Queen might freeze to death?" Elsa took a few seconds to process this, and finally come to the conclusion that part of it was, in fact, a joke. Maybe? She resisted the urge to snap at him that this hypothetical King would not need to worry about her freezing. She had to try to be cordial.

"No, I am not wed."

"By choice, or lack of suitors?" This time, Elsa did not stop herself from glaring at him. His amused expression did nothing to ease her irritation. So she had not imagined it earlier, he really was mocking her appearance! This .. this ... viking!

"I'll have you know that kings, princes and people from all countries within travelling distance have asked for my hand. I simply have not

decided yet."

"Well, I hope you pick carefully." He said, and his words may have been supportive, but his tone again had this slightly doubtful and mocking vibe.

She didn't offer any more questions, and he did not either. Eventually, when it became apparent that he would not ask anything else, she spoke.

"No more questions?"

He shook his head. "Not from me."

"I have to apologize once again for my conduct today." She forced herself to say. If she couldn't hold herself from being improper, she could at least apologize for it. "It has been most unbecoming from a person of my position, especially when directed at a person of your position."

At least it had the result of amusing Chief Hiccup, who let out a chuckle, and smiled. By now, Elsa had given up trying to guess his reactions to anything.

"Do not worry, please. I know of several people whose attitude would be many times improved by adopting your worst manner of conduct."

Had she just been compared to Vikings? She caught that thought, and admonished herself for it. A leader could not afford to judge like this. But still, she was not sure if she should take this as a compliment or not.

The silence stretched, and Elsa knew that their conversation was over. She was surprised when she noted the sun's position. Several hours had passed since they had started on the journey back to Arendelle.

They stopped for lunch, and they ate in silence, the cold and the harshness of the journey making everyone want to preserve their strength. Elsa saw the dragon, who had been following them from above, land on the nearby woods. Chief Hiccup excused himself and went to the woods to him. Elsa let him go, and an hour later, he came back, and they took off again.

This time, Chief Hiccup left her side at the head of the procession, and let himself fall back to its end. There, he exchanged occasional words with the soldiers in charge of the supply horses, but Elsa saw nothing of him for the remainder of the day.

When the sun was going down, she decided that it was time to make camp. Her entourage left the beaten path and headed for the trees, pulling out fabrics and setting up tents next to the woods.

Elsa looked skywards. Even now, the Night Fury was circling them, so high above that all she could see was a speck in the sky, but it was there. She led her horse towards Chief Hiccup as her soldiers set up their tents, with hers in the middle of camp, while others went in search of firewood. The Chief was looking at the working men with obvious interest.

"We will find you a tent, Chief Hiccup." She told him as she approached and stopped her horse next to his. "We always carry spare fabrics in case some get lost or torn."

"I appreciate the thought, but I won't need it."

"You carry your own tent?"

"Not exactly. I guess ... sort of. I could show you?" He offered, his voice unsure. Elsa was confused, but nevertheless nodded. At her nod, the Chief dismounted, and gave the reigns to the soldier waiting for them.

"Follow me." He said, waiting for her to dismount. She did so, with much more grace than he did, she noted inwardly, and her own horse was collected to be fed and watered.

"Where are we going?" She asked him as he started walking, entering the woods and weaving between the trees.

"We're looking for a decent sized clearing. Somewhere for Toothless to land."

Now, Elsa understood. "Come this way." She said briskly. She knew this side of the mountain quite well, and knew there was a clearing less than three minutes walk, eastward.

Chief Hiccup followed her without complaint, and sure enough, Elsa lead him to the clearing. The Chief inspected it carefully, and nodded, more to himself than to her. He looked up and squinted, spotting the black spot that was Toothless up in the sky. The sun had set, and the faint light was leaving, as well. Soon, it would be completely dark.

Chief Hiccup removed a leather glove, and brought his, now free, fingers to his mouth. A piercing whistle reverberated around the clearing, at first long but then cutting with a sharp note. Elsa could recognize a summons when she heard one. She looked up, and sure enough, the dark spot was approaching rapidly, growing bigger and bigger until she could make out the dragon's shape. It was free falling, its wings closed to its sides! When it showed no signs of cuttings its fall, even when it had nearly reached the ground, she threw a worried glance at the Chief, but he seemed relaxed if a bit exasperated, so she stopped worrying. Clearly, the dragon had everything under control.

Indeed, the dragon opened its wings, catching the wind, and cut its fall. It still landed heavily, the ground shaking as he all but crashed onto it, but the dragon shook its head and bounded to Hiccup like nothing had happened.

Chief Hiccup released that deep, genuine laugh again, and laid his hand on the Night Fury's head. Dragon and rider closed their eyes, and Elsa had the awkward feeling that she was intruding in a very personal moment.

The moment was broken, and now the Chief was scratching the dragon's head and speaking softly to it.

"Did you hunt, bud? Have you eaten?"

The dragon warbled, and it seemed to be a satisfactory reply to the Chief, for he nodded. "Well," he said, "this is where we're crashing tonight, so get comfortable."

With a happy gargle, the dragon began pacing the clearing. When it passed by Elsa, she stiffened and got out of its way, but the beast paid her no mind, sniffing and padding the ground. To Elsa's fascination, the Night Fury plopped itself into the ground and curled its tail around itself, laying its head on its front paws like an overgrown cat. One of its wings settled on the ground next to him, but the other remained aloft.

"That's my que." Chief Hiccup said, and to Elsa's further astonishment, he settled himself on the dragon's side, with his hands behind his head and let out a soft, tired sigh.

"You sleep in your armor?" She couldn't help but ask. The Chief opened one lazy, green eye to look at her.

"It's a useful habit when traveling in the wild. We need to be ready for anything."

"Oh. I see."

"Was there anything else?" The Chief prodded lightly. Elsa bristled under the obvious dismissal, but reigned her temper, knowing that he was more tired than her, and it was time to rest.

"We will arrive in Arendelle the day after tomorrow." She informed him.

"Very well. Goodnight, Queen Elsa." With that final goodbye, the dragon's wing lowered, beginning to cover the Chief completely.

Elsa was about to turn to leave, but as she did so, something stopped her. "Chief Haddock." She called out, voice a little higher than she would have liked. "Hiccup." She called again, without realizing it. The wing stopped, and only the Chief's head was still visible. He was looking at her, askance.

"Thank you ... for sparing my life."

His eyes widened a little, but he gave her a serious nod, and Elsa inwardly sighed in relief. The wing covered the Chief, and she turned to leave. She didn't know what exactly led her to do this, but she was thankful that it happened.

Mindlessly, Elsa went about her routine, entering the tent that had been set up for her. She undressed, wore her nightgown, and after washing her face settled on the furs, to sleep.

Her sleep that night was restless. Her dreams were full of darkness and fire.

She was once again thrown on the ground, but the snow was black rather than white. The rider was on her once again, but this time the knife was pressing a little deeper, drawing a line of blood rather than a single drop. The rider himself was distorted, almost a

caricature of his true self. He was talking, but his voice sounded very harsh to Elsa, and she couldn't understand what he was saying. The eye slits of his helmets were glowing a fiery red, and smoke was rising out of them.

She turned her head to look in the blackness to her left, and two pairs of demonic green eyes opened in the void. A maw of razor sharp teeth opened, and an unholy screeching filled the air. As the blue fireball headed towards her, Elsa finally found her voice, and screamed.

She woke up screaming, hands throwing the furs off of her, eyes looking around herself wildly. She was panting harshly, and perspirating heavily.

"My Queen, is everything alright?" Her captain called from outside the tent, reluctant to get inside to check. Elsa had enough presence of mind to reassure him that yes, everything was alright, and that yes, she would come out for breakfast soon.

She ate with her soldiers, but did not see him at breakfast. She assumed he had his own private breakfast with his dragon, as he must have for however long he's been travelling.

She was about to head into the woods to retrieve him, when she saw the shape of the dragon take flight from above the trees. So she waited and sure enough, Chief Hiccup burst from the foliage, a pleasant smile on his face. He must have found a nearby stream, for his hair was wet and clinging to his head. If he was feeling cold by being wet on the northern mountains, he didn't show it. Her mind's eyes supplied her with an image of him with fiery red, smoking eyes, and she repressed a shiver.

They exchanged pleasantries, and the procession mounted again. Like yesterday evening, he spent most of the day at the end of the entourage. The people he'd spoken with the day before had opened up a bit, and were now having an actual discussion, though Elsa did not know what they were talking so animatedly about. Stealing glances behind her every ten minutes, she couldn't help but feel jealous of these soldiers, with whom the Chief was talking so freely while she had to labor to coax every word out of him.

They stopped for lunch, and though the Viking chief ate with them, he left midway, no doubt to reunite with his dragon. He was back before everyone was ready to leave again, however. Elsa had given up hope of another discussion with him, and the Viking had surprised her once again when he rode faster and caught up with her. She suspected that him doing the opposite of what she expected was going to become a pattern.

He nodded at her in greeting, and the focused on the road ahead of him. He was a fast study, Elsa noted, in that he got used to the horse pretty quickly, but it still required concentration from him, when it was second nature to her.

They didn't speak, and Elsa respected his silence when he was busy taking in the environment around them. They were slowly but surely approaching the roots of the mountains. Soon, they would cross the hills surrounding Arendelle, and after that, it was a few hours' ride.

The sun was going down, they had no more than a couple hours light left to the day. Elsa's watching of Chief Hiccup bore interesting results. If he noticed her watching him, he didn't say anything, but Elsa would bet that he hadn't, because his neck was straining to take in everything around him. The sky had cleared from the blizzard of two days ago, and the beauty of the north mountain was visible to all.

"Is it not at all similar to Berk?" she asked him, after he had been staring at a faraway mountain peak for ten minutes straight. His head whipped to her, and his gloved fingers found the braid on his hair on what was clearly a habitual, if not nervous, move.

"Our mountains are much more ... rocky, I suppose. They climb almost vertically, to the point where to climb them is nearly impossible."

"You travel a lot?" Elsa asked with interest. He didn't seem indifferent to his duty from what little she saw of him, so his wandering lifestyle, and the balancing act between it and his responsibilities, interested her greatly.

"Whenever I can." He nodded at her. "I love Berk, and I would do anything for it and my people, but traveling has always been my passion. It is only recently that I have been able to indulge, however."

"Your passion, huh?" He looked at her, and her smile must have puzzled him. His perplexed expression only made her smile wider.

"Mine and Toothless'. He does his best to not show it, but I can feel him get restless as the months pass and we stay always on the same place. He loves Berk, too, but it is in his nature to wander."

"How did you and Toothless end up ... friends?" She forced the word out of her mouth. She had seen enough evidence of their partnership, but it still seemed unbelievable to her.

"Long story." He tried to shake it off. Elsa raised an eyebrow, pointing to the empty, snowy road ahead of them.

"We've got time."

"Too long for the road," he insisted. Oh no, you're not getting away that easily.

"Make it short, then." He shot her a look between a glare and a warning, but nevertheless replied, after taking a minute to think of a proper reply.

"I shot him down." Elsa did not know what she was expecting, but this was certainly not it.

"What?"

"I created a machine to bring down dragons. You see, at the time, Toothless was the greatest menace of our tribe. I tested the prototype of my machine on him. It worked. That's when he lost his

tailfin." He said, voice laden with sorrow over his friend's loss, even after what Elsa assumed was years. Despite herself, she found herself drawn into the tale.

"And then what happened?" She encouraged him.

"I let him go."

"You simply ... let him go? Even though, as you said, he was your village's number one enemy?"

His face darkened, but he nodded nevertheless.

"You weren't supposed to do that, were you?"

He shook his head. "No. Everyone else in my tribe would have killed him if they'd found him tied up in the woods."

"It makes sense. Why didn't you?"

Elsa realized that she must have crossed some line when he levelled a dark glare her way.

"Take care of what you say, Queen Elsa. It is that exact attitude that spared your life yesterday."

To that, Elsa had no reply. At least, none that she thought Chief Haddock would find satisfactory.

Instead, she looked ahead, in the distance between the white hills.

"Welcome, Chief Hiccup." She called, still looking ahead. The Chief followed her gaze, and only now did she steal a look at him. The look of utter awe on his face was worth all the harsh words until now.

In the distance between the hills, the city of Arendelle shone like a jewel under the evening sun. The bustling city, the sprawling castle, and the port filled to capacity with huge merchant ships and warships. It was still almost a full day's travel, but they could see it.

She extended her arms forwards, as an artist might present his latest masterpiece.

"To Arendelle."

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>A Chance Encounter, Chapter 3

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Hiccup could not help it, he stared. There was awe evident in his

features by the widening of his eyes, or the way his mouth lay half-open.

"Is it as impressive up close as it is from afar?" Out of the corner of his eye, he caught her smirk slightly.

"Even more." And, Odin help him, he believed her.

He'd seen a few cities in his travels before, but none like this. None as big, or with buildings as tall, or with a harbor so extensive, or with ships so large. And the ships! They looked gigantic, even from up here, much bigger than his own drakkar warships. His eyes moved from the massive ships to the castle. Its walls were practically gleaming, and it was situated on a small island in the port. He'd seen a couple of castles before, but they were nothing but forts. Stone walls and a gate to protect the garrison inside. This, this looked majestic. A fitting residence for royalty.

Hiccup belatedly realized that his mouth was hanging open, and closed it with a thump, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment, running his braid between his fingers. Queen Elsa let out a low chuckle, but Hiccup didn't think she was mocking him. It sounded lighthearted.

"It all looks very impressive. I have to admit, the ships did the biggest impression."

"They're even bigger up close." Elsa informed him.

"Let's get moving then!" Hiccup said, unable to contain his excitement, his anger over their previous discussion forgotten. "I want to see everything."

The procession started moving again, and Hiccup found his spirits lifted. Though he'd known that he was heading to the capital of Queen Elsa's kingdom, only after actually seeing it did it finally register. He knew that the mainland was very different from his own lands, but this place couldn't be more different from Berk if it tried.

He looked up, finding Toothless above in the clouds. His heart ached to be up there with him, but this was necessary. He knew how much the dragon disliked flying by himself, and it never ceased to amaze him. It had taken quite a while for him to be convinced that Toothless wasn't doing it just to be nice. But no, for some reason, the amazing Night Fury had gotten so used to flying with Hiccup's aid that anything else seemed alien and wrong to him.

Odin bless his big, draconian heart. What would he do without him?

"I'm assuming your people will be as accommodating of Toothless as you have been?" He asked the Queen as he looked at her, faint traces of sarcasm on his tone. He saw her flinch, and mentally patted himself on the back. Maybe rubbing it in her face was wrong, but she deserved it, and maybe this way she'd get used to the dragon's presence faster. Her distrust of his companion was getting really old really fast.

"I will take care of that issue." She responded, and turned her head back, motioning for one of her soldiers to move forward. Once the horseman was next to the Queen, she addressed him.

"Run ahead of us, get to the castle as fast you can. Inform my sister that we will be arriving in the morning with Chief Hiccup Haddock of the vikings, along with his dragon Toothless, who are both, my guests. Tell her to spread the word, too. I want civility when we arrive."

"Yes, my Queen."

With this, the horseman kicked the sides of his horse, and they took off down the path in a gallop. Soon, they were out of sight. Hiccup looked at the Queen, and she had a faintly smug expression about her. For a moment, her horse was replaced by a Deadly Nadder, and Elsa was replaced by another blond, smug expression in place as she teased him.

He shook his head, not willing to let such thoughts get to him.

"Is Toothless domesticated?" She suddenly asked, and he scowled.

'Domesticated?' He fumed inwardly.

"Toothless is not a pussycat, or a pet dog." He snapped at her. She was taken aback at the force in his voice, and he forced himself to take a deep breath and relax.

"Apologies, Queen Elsa, for taking out my anger on you. You are not the correct recipient for it."

Elsa studied him for a few seconds, before speaking neutrally.
"Apology accepted, Chief Hiccup. My phrasing was very poor, I now understand. Let me rephrase. Can Toothless navigate buildings without making a mess?"

'Much better,' Hiccup approved, but didn't say it. Instead, he let his expression soften even more. He really had been frowning a lot lately. Separation from Toothless was making him snappy.

"If I explain to him that he must behave, he will behave."

"Is your constant presence required for his good behavior?"

Hiccup again had to remind himself that Queen Elsa knew nothing about dragons besides old tales, and that it was sensible of her to be asking such questions. He did not let his anger resurface.

"Toothless is very intelligent, he does not attack humans randomly. Likewise, he will not attack pets or flocks. However, the sight of weapons make him uneasy, and defensive. Any move that could be seen as aggressive should be avoided."

Queen Elsa nodded, and Hiccup assumed she filed the knowledge away for later perusal and use.

Hiccup took some time to study Queen Elsa, who was casually looking

anywhere but him. He didn't really expect to know her after a single day, but he had no idea what to think of her. She gave him so many mixed signals, she'd have given his father a run for his money.

First she tried to kill them without so much as a 'How do you do'. Then, she was tripping all over herself and practically begging him to allow her to make up for it. She tried to be cordial with both him and Toothless, but Hiccup could see that she hated the dragon. And at times, she would look at him and flinch, her eyes widened and unfocused, and Hiccup won't know what to make of that.

Well, at least she seemed fairly interesting. He would stay at the castle for as long as he was entertained or found things interesting, and so far things looked promising. Her beauty has nothing to do with it, he thought to himself turning once again to look the profile she presented him, light blond braid falling over her shoulder and a small smile playing on her lips, but it is definitely a plus.

The rest of their journey for the day ended soon, after the sun dipped, and they made camp in a field that had almost no snow. They had well and truly left the mountain behind by now.

Green was all around them now, with the occasional splash of white. Gentle forests sprawled over the edges of the road, and the soft song of a dozen different birds reached their ears, melodious and soothing.

Above them, the sky was clear, with only the traces of clouds left. The winds were changing. Winter was leaving Arendelle behind.

Hiccup looked back and saw the towering forms of the mountains, and vowed to himself that he and Toothless would explore them better in the coming days, hopefully blizzard-free.

The camp was set up, and everyone sat around the newly created fire to have their dinner, which was not much, but still more than Hiccup was used to. Stew, bread, and wine the likes of which he'd never had before. He wasn't complaining.

He was sitting next to the Queen, with the captain on a log opposite them. Hiccup knew the captain didn't like him, but didn't let it bother him. From the looks he was throwing him and the Queen, he wasn't sure if he disliked him more for trying to kill them or for having such a casual attitude with the Queen.

Honestly, Hiccup had no idea what the protocols for dealing with the Queen were, but he wasn't going to go out of his way to lick her boots. He would be respectful and he always was to people who deserved it, and so far Queen Elsa, despite his misgivings, appeared to belong in that category.

"How much more until the city?" Hiccup asked her over his stew, turning to look at her. He'd caught her mid-bite, and she stopped upon hearing his voice, piece of bread halfway in her mouth. Hiccup repressed a snort as she bit down, chewed, swallowed, and only then turned to look back at him.

>He could see traces of annoyance for interrupting her dinner, or at least not waiting until she could speak. Getting a rise out of her

was the most fun he'd had while in the ground, and he didn't think he'd stop anytime soon. He'd figure her out, sooner or later.<p>

"Not more than five hours, after we leave in the morning." She replied, and very deliberately took another bite out of her bread, glaring at him and daring him to interrupt her again. He guffawed and rose his hands, palms open in a show of non-aggression. He saw the edge of her mouth upturn, and declared a victory.

"I think it would be better if Toothless walked in with us, when we arrive. It'd be better if the people saw the two of us together from the start, and it will be more convenient than having to call Toothless down later." He told her, once he was sure she wasn't eating anything.

She took the time to consider this, chewing softly and staring blankly ahead, and Hiccup let her, finishing off his stew and setting the bowl down.

"Alright. The problem with the mounts still stands, however. We will stop a mile outside the city, and send the horses ahead. You will call upon your dragon, and we walk the rest of the way. How does that sound?"

"Perfect, Queen Elsa." Indeed, he approved. The populace would see Toothless sooner rather than later, and thus save some problems down the line. "I have to warn you though, there have to be no aggressive moves from the crowd, or things could get ... complicated."

"I assure you that my subjects can and will be civilized, considering the notification I sent ahead."

She seemed certain of this, but Hiccup was less so. He didn't speak his doubts, however, for it was late and he was not in the mood for another confrontation.

"I will take my leave then. I will call Toothless to the other end of this field, it should be far away for the horses not to get scared."

Queen Elsa looked at him, and nodded. "Goodnight, Chief Hiccup."

"Goodnight." Hiccup called over his shoulder as he walked away, raising a hand. He nodded to some of the soldiers he'd been talking to yesterday and today, discussing saddles and different loading practices.

Once at the end of the grassy field, he brought his fingers to his mouth and whistled. Toothless appeared not long after, landing heavily and pouncing on him. Hiccup laughed at the dragon's enthusiasm, and took the time to scratch him at his favorite spots, as well as clean some blood on his mouth from his unfortunate dinner.

Hiccup let Toothless burn the ground to get settled, and untied the sword from his belt, placing it along with his helmet next to the place he would lay on. He guessed that they were drawing weird looks from the soldiers at the other end of the field, but they'd have to get used to it eventually. Rider and dragon fell into a deep slumber,

comfortable next to each other as nowhere else.

His dreams were, like last night, filled with snow. Sometimes it was the light snow of a lazy sunday morning, others it was the terrifying blizzard that nearly claimed their life. Hiccup was well and truly sick of the color white by the time he woke up.

He was woken up by a nudge from Toothless, who had not moved even though he'd been awake for a while. Hiccup heard footsteps approach, and shuffle uncertainly for a few seconds.

"Chief Haddock, sir? Are you awake?" It was one of the soldiers. Hiccup roused, and Toothless raised his wing to allow him exit. Hiccup saw the soldier visibly shake at his proximity to the dragon, but paid him no mind. It was too early for this.

"What is it?" He grumbled, rising to his feet and rubbing his half-open eyes with his hand. He had the distinct feeling that his hair was a disaster. Proof of this was Queen Elsa's weird look, and subsequent guffaws, all the way from her camp.

He scowled, and focused back on the soldier. He thought he'd caught the word 'breakfast' somewhere in there, so he simply nodded. The soldier scrambled away, doing his best to not appear as to be doing so. Hiccup did not care. He turned to the saddlebags, cleaning his face with some water, and running his wet fingers through his hair, trying to at least bring them to a respectable shape. Then, he put some water through his mouth, before spitting on the ground. He took a leaf of mint, and popped it in his mouth, enjoying the strong flavor.

He looked towards the camp, only to see Queen Elsa berate the soldier who'd woken him up for one reason or another. She'd obviously sent him to wake him, so what she could be scolding him for he had no idea, nor the inclination to find out.

"Hey bud," he said to Toothless, running his hand through his pristine scales. The dragon turned, and nudged his snout into his chest. "Good morning to you too."

He strapped his helmet on the saddlebags, certain that he would no longer need it. He tied his sword around his waist, and put his gloves back on.

>"Here's the plan. You go find yourself something juicy for breakfast, okay? Then, in about four hours, find us. I'll signal you when it's time to come down. It will be after the horses go away. And no, you are still not allowed to eat any. That would be terrible manners."<p>

Toothless grumbled through his teeth, ears flat on his neck.

"Honestly. You're the Chief's dragon. Try to act like it, eh?" He was rewarded for his cheek with a swift smack from the dragon's tail, which sent him sprawling to the ground on his back. He glared at Toothless from his position, and the mischievous dragon only did his imitation of laughter, a repeated, throaty sound that admittedly sounded exactly like the real thing. Hiccup had yet to figure out if the sound was natural or of it was, in fact, an imitation of the human sound.

"Just for that, I'm reducing your fish baskets to two."

This had an immediate reaction from the Night Fury, who let out an indignant cry and growled at Hiccup, teeth bared and eyes narrowed. Hiccup was not intimidated. He rose to his feet, and made a show of dusting himself off.

"Apologize, and I may reconsider." He offered. Toothless closed his maw, and stared at him. Eventually, the staring contest broke, and the dragon looked downward, ears pressed flat on his head, and a pitiful sound rose from his throat. Hiccup patted him on the snout.

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it? We're back to three baskets, now. See, apologizing always works."

With that helpful tip, Hiccup turned and started walking towards the camp. He had not expected the blow that came at him. He felt the blow from Toothless' tail at his back, and the next thing he knew he was spitting dirt, laying face first on the half-snow half-mud ground.

Behind him, the Night Fury was having a fit of what Hiccup could only assume was laughter. He had lied down flat on the ground, covering his head with his forepaws, and letting out the hacking sounds of his amusement again, this time much more intensely.

His brow twitched in annoyance as rose to his feet again. He probably deserved that, but he would die before he'd let the already prideful dragon know.

"Bad dragon," he admonished, shaking a finger at the Night Fury, who was ignoring him. "Very bad dragon." He chanced a look towards the camp, and all color fled his face as he saw Queen Elsa, eyes undeniably boring into his own, trying and utterly failing to hide her laughter, a hand over her mouth.

"I don't know how, and I don't know when, but I *will* get you back for this. Just you wait. You'd better sleep with one eye open from here on out, you hear? If you think you'll get away with this by only losing a few fish baskets, you're sorely mistaken." He threatened the dragon, who was just now beginning to get himself under control.

"Get your ugly snout out of here. Bad dragon!" Toothless rose to his feet, still laughing at him, and took to the air with a great leap.

Hiccup sighed, wishing that he did not have to go to the camp. He shook his head at this thought. He'd faced down vikings, dragons, giant dragons, and his own fears and insecurities. He shouldn't be intimidated because he made a fool of himself in front of a woman, right? Right?

"Quite the performance." Was the first thing Queen Elsa said to him, as soon as he reached their camp. He saw several soldiers try and fail to hide their smirks of amusement. He tried not to scowl too much.

"Thank you, thank you, I was trying. Good morning to you too."

Queen Elsa took pity on him, and passed him a piece of bread and cheese. He took them, nodding gratefully, and began to eat. Having seen the city, he did not doubt that the Queen could, if she so chose, to have practically everything she wanted for meals, even on the road. But Elsa didn't, instead going for the practical and the light. He could -and would- respect that.

He examined her a bit closer. Her braid was done in a different style today, though the differences were minuscule. She'd changed her clothes during the night. It was still a pretty similar ensemble, and still white, but this time there were quite a few blue pieces interwoven with the white ones, and even a hint of green at some fastenings. Her outfit would fit a hunter, albeit a horrendously rich and immaculately clean one. This, too, he approved.

He was suddenly thankful that he'd taken the time to clean his clothes on that stream he'd found earlier. Lighting two fires to keep him warm and dry his clothes had been easy, even if Toothless nagged him about it.

She caught him staring, and smiled. He averted his eyes, willing himself not to flush at such a rookie mistake. Again, she must have taken pity on him, for she did not comment or tease him about it. Is this what it felt like, to not be the only merciful person in the group?

Breakfast finished, the soldiers gathered up the tents and supplies, loading everything on the horses. They climbed on the mounts and were on the road again. Hiccup could feel the agitation in everyone, even the Queen. He could sympathize, there was nothing wrong with being eager to be back in one's home.

After an hour of traveling, they'd left all snow behind. The hills they were traversing were green and lush with vegetation. Arendelle, Hiccup noted curiously, was situated at the base of the hill, so that people were traveling uphill when leaving from the city. Around the city was the fjord, that spilled out to the open sea some ways away.

As they approached, he noted that Arendelle was not really as huge as he'd imagined it. Excluding the castle, the town couldn't be bigger than Berk. They were following quaint little dirt roads, carefully dug and zigzagging the hills, bringing them ever closer to the capital. Around them were a variety of empty fields, soon to be filled by working hands.

"Halt." Queen Elsa called, and the procession stopped. They couldn't be far away now, and even though a hilltop blocked their view of Arendelle, Hiccup knew they almost there.

"Dismount." Was her next command. All the soldiers complied, and ten of them gathered all the horses. Elsa waved them forward, and they left, following the twisting road until they were gone from sight. The remaining troops gathered in neat lines of three men across along the road, waiting for further instruction.

Hiccup noted that several of them were staring at the black dot that Toothless, up in the sky, getting progressively bigger as he approached them. Apparently, Queen Elsa saw them, too.

"Do not be ridiculous." She scolded them, and her voice carried easily all the way to the last soldier at the rear guard. "There is nothing to fear. The dragon will not harm us." She sent a hard look at him as she said it, and Hiccup repressed the urge to glower back.

What did she think? That Hiccup could not control the dragon? That Toothless needed controlling in order to not go on a killing spree? He wasn't a captured wolf, barely brought to heel, for Odin's sake.

"Chief Hiccup and the dragon Toothless are our guests, and I want no skittishness around them, understand?"

A chorus of "Yes, Queen Elsa." responded to her, and she seemed satisfied. Just in time, too, for Toothless chose that moment to make his landing in front of her and Hiccup. Hiccup saw, through his peripheral vision, the captain stiffen, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword, but the older man did not make a move.

Toothless' landing had been more graceful than his other, careless ones, as if he understood that gentleness was key from now on. Hiccup walked and met the dragon halfway between them, rubbing his snout with his hand.

"Good boy." He murmured. "Here's what's going to happen now, and listen carefully, okay?" Once Hiccup was sure that he had the Night Fury's undivided attention, he continued. "You will walk next to me, yes, walk. We will enter the city. There are probably going to be a lot of people there, and you won't recognize any of them. Don't make any sudden moves, okay? They have never seen a dragon before, so they'll be afraid of you. Show them that they don't need to fear you."

At this, Toothless snorted, his prideful nature compelling him to imply that no, fear of him was not something to be avoided.

"Don't be such a beast." Hiccup scolded him. "We're going to be staying here for a while, and I don't want to deal with you scaring the stuffing out of people. You be on your best behavior when we're in the city or the castle, alright?"

Finally, Toothless relented, and let out a dismissive grunt. Hiccup, satisfied, turned to look at Queen Elsa. She was looking at him oddly, and he suddenly wanted to know how much of what he'd said she heard. Finally deciding it didn't matter, he nodded to her.

"We're ready."

"Alright, let's go."

They walked, Elsa and Hiccup side by side and Toothless next to Hiccup, close enough for him to rest a hand on the dragon's neck, extra insurance of the dragon's calmness. Toothless had gotten better with crowds over the years, but Hiccup mainly attributed this to him knowing the Vikings, and the vikings in turn treating Toothless as a member of their society. He was not sure if the presence of complete strangers would not discomfort Toothless to an aggressive state.

Nevertheless, Hiccup trusted him, and his own ability to calm him down, if need be.

Idly, he scratched the dragon's neck as they walked. The ambling creature started purring from deep in his throat, eyes half-closing in pleasure, strange people forgotten.

"Chief Hiccup, may I ask you a question?" The Queen called from next to him. He turned to her, and graced her with an easy smile.

"I believe we've had this exchange before." She offered her own smile, and proceeded with her question.

"I've really tried not to ask. Believe me, I have, but it's been on my mind all morning. Please don't be offended."

"I sincerely doubt you would offend me, Queen Elsa. Ask your question."

"Why the name? Hiccup, I mean."

Hiccup blinked at her for a second, and then before he realized what he was doing he was laughing again. How many times did that make, now? He was having so much fun dealing with people outside of his tribe.

"I'm actually named after an ancestor." He replied once he controlled himself, not wanting to insult Queen Elsa. At least, not yet, and not so overtly.

"I remember you mentioned that you were the third, correct?"

"Correct. The first was the founder of Berk. The second ... let's not talk about the second."

"Well ... alright." He could tell she wanted to ask more, and the way she unconsciously bit her lower lip to stop herself was so cute, he had to stop himself from grinning.

"I know how it sounds but believe you me, it's not the worst. It's actually one of the better ones. Among the vikings, parents believe that a hideous name will scare off gnomes and trolls."

Queen Elsa cocked a delicate eyebrow, and Odin smite him if she didn't have it mastered to an art form.

"I don't think they'd be scared off by a name, personally."

"What would?"

His question and confusion made her look at him oddly.

"The trolls, of course."

"Trolls _ exist_?" He asked, louder than he'd intended to. He had to quickly school his surprised expression before he made a bigger fool of himself. To his even greater surprise, Queen Elsa started laughing. Unlike his own, almost barking laughter, hers was melodious and seamless, like music.

"What's so funny?" He asked her once she had her laughing down to the occasional giggle. She looked at him, angling her head slightly to the right, a wide smile on her face.

"Apologies, Chief Hiccup. It just seemed quite peculiar that you ride such a creature of legend as a dragon, and the existence of trolls surprised you so." Describing it aloud must have made her realize some hidden aspect of humor to it, for she started laughing again. Thankfully, it was more controlled this time, and her hand covered her mouth.

Hiccup thought about it, and he had to give it to her.

"Alright, I admit, that is kind of funny."

"Am I to assume that there are no trolls in Berk, then?"

"Not to my knowledge. Although there is someone who ..." he trailed off his question, looking at Elsa contemplatively. "What are trolls like?"

"Short creatures, humanoid in shape, can be disguised as rocks. We've had some dealings with them in the past. Lovely race, although ... excitable." Hiccup sensed much more hidden than what she'd let on, but perhaps this was a story he'd hear in the coming days.

They had now walked around the hill, and were following the downwards path towards the town that they could see, below. It was very impressive, and the castle looked even bigger the closer he got to it.

"They don't steal socks, by any chance, do they?" He asked. He had to know, once and for all. Queen Elsa looked at him oddly.

"Socks?"

"Left ones, to be exact."

"... not to my knowledge."

"Oh. Thank you for the information."

"You're very welcome."

They didn't say anything else, because they reached the outskirts of the town. Sturdy stone buildings became more and more common. With them, Hiccup had his first look at the people of Arendelle.

Small groups of people were gathered by the sides of the road to welcome their Queen back. No doubt, the rumors of the dragon had brought out even more than usual. Hiccup saw them, dressed in earthly colors, looking at the dragon in apprehension.

He would recognize the appearance of peasant anywhere. Berk did not have peasant in the sense of the lower class citizens, but they seemed to be prevalent almost everywhere else. Among the peasants were others, less in number but surprisingly plentiful, dressed in fanciful dresses and outfits of all colors, the luckier people of

Arendelle. Purple, blue, red, they were all here. Hiccup, being from a society where practicality and ease of movement could make the difference between life and death, had never been able to understand these people.

The further in they went, the more people gathered around them. They were orderly, and no line of soldiers was necessary to hold them back. The closer they got to the castle, the rich people began to outnumber the peasants, until there were no more peasants on the crowds around them.

Hiccup didn't know how to feel about the fearful looks they sent Toothless, but the presence of the Queen next to him, perfectly calm, apparently was enough to soothe them.

Soon, the people got used to the sight of the onyx creature, and started cheering for their Queen, yelling welcomes, and Hiccup even heard his own name called a couple times.

He was almost overwhelmed by the crowd and before he knew it, they had reached the sea. He saw ahead of them the bridge that connected the town with the castle, and the great wooden gates wide open. Starting with the gate, there stood a pair of guards at each side, at intervals of five meters. If the guards were wary of Toothless, they didn't show it, standing rigid like statues. On the contrary, Toothless saw their raised halberds and crooned in discomfort. Queen Elsa turned to look at him, alarmed, but Hiccup patted the dragon's neck softly, and he calmed.

Hiccup's eyes caressed the castle, and he couldn't be certain that he wasn't swooning. The walls were built with sturdy stone and painted an earthly beige color. Left and right of the gate were towers, the roofs of which were painted light green. Along the length of the walls and in equidistant intervals, more towers sprang up, tall and proud.

The towers got progressively taller with every layer of walls, the closer one got to the center of the complex of buildings that comprised the castle, until the tallest tower that Hiccup had to crane his neck to see. Some of the deeper towers had carefully cultivated rose vines hanging around them, making for quite the fairy tale image.

Each tower bore the crest that Hiccup had seen on the armor and shields of soldiers. The golden yellow stylized crocus, emblazoned on a background that was purple on the left half and green on the right half. The crest was also on the stone above the gate, and each wall surface between turrets boasted a crest chiseled on it.

A lighthouse could be seen, tall and majestic, all the way from the other side of the castle.

Above them, on the ramparts, soldiers were already running around in what Hiccup assumed were their morning drills. He could see plenty of them standing rigid on their posts, bows or halberds carefully balanced over their shoulders.

They walked through the bridge with no problem, and then entered the gate. Hiccup tried to keep his staring to a respectable level, since he knew he had to make a good impression. He reminded himself that

he'd have time to study the architecture of the place at his leisure, in the coming days.

>Through the gate was a wide courtyard, with fountains here and there. It was mostly empty, and various doors adorned the side walls. Here, Queen Elsa stopped, and Hiccup followed her example.<p>

The Queen turned and addressed the captain. "This is it, captain. I appreciate the escort of you and your men. You may rest and return to your families. Dismissed, and take two days off duty."

"Yes, my Queen. Thank you, my Queen." The Captain replied, bowing deeply, before smartly turning on his heels and marching to one of the side doors, no doubt a barracks of some sort. The soldiers followed him, leaving Hiccup alone with Toothless and Elsa, and the guards posted along the walls of the courtyard. With a careful eye, Hiccup could spot what he could only assume was the royal crest of Arendelle practically everywhere.

Hiccup was trying to think of something to say, but the Queen wasn't looking at him. Hiccup followed her gaze, looking ahead and down.

"What's this? New friends? And a dragon, too!"

He blinked.

"Hi, I'm Olaf! I like warm hugs!"

In front of him stood a snowman. Relatively short, it was otherwise pretty generic, comprising of three spheres of snow with twigs for arms and a carrot for a nose. What was unusual about it, was the wide smile on its face, the fact that it had its twig arms wide open, and the fact that it had spoken.

Keeping his face impassive, he turned to Elsa. She was regarding him carefully, he could tell she was greatly amused.

"Are you seeing this as well?" He asked, just to make sure flying for so long hadn't finally driven him mad. His comment finally broke the Queen's resolve, and she fell into a fit of giggles, which she endeavored to hide behind a hand.

"This is Olaf. He's our snowman friend."

While they talked, the snowman Olaf had decided that waiting for hugs was not going to cut it, and run the short distance between them, wrapping each tiny twig arm as far around Toothless' forepaw as it could.

Toothless peered down at the weird creature, and Hiccup could tell that, though he didn't feel at all threatened, he was very irritated by the snowy abomination. Indeed, Toothless' eyes had narrowed as he looked down at the thing hugging his limb. He looked up at Hiccup, and let out a low growl, baring his teeth.

Hiccup turned to Elsa. "Toothless wants to know if he can kill it." He informed her. She raised that perfectly proportioned eyebrow again, and smirked at him.

"Tell Toothless he is free to try."

Not giving any thought at to why she accepted, he turned back towards Toothless, who was looking at him expectantly. The little snow hellion had yet to release his paw. Hiccup jerked his head towards the thing and with savage glee, Toothless raised his foot, snowman still attached, and swiped it away. The snowman flew off, shrieking as he did so, and crashed against a nearby fountain. His three pieces scattered and rolled to different areas of the courtyard.

Hiccup frowned. Had they just killed the Queen's pet? That would certainly put a damper on things. He glanced at her, but she seemed not at all worried.

"Oh dear. I seem to be in pieces." Again that annoying voice! Hiccup whipped his head to look at the fountain, and the piece of snow that was the head was laughing while the part with the hands and the piece with the feet dragged themselves to it.

Hiccup brought his hand to his face and rubbed his eyes, feeling a headache would soon trouble him.

"Olaf, go now. You'll get the chance to meet Chief Hiccup and his dragon Toothless later. We've had a long journey and the Chief need to rest." He shot Queen Elsa a grateful look, and she returned it with a smile. She waved her hand and a small trail of frost erupted from it. It quickly reached the pieces of snowman. They rose to the air and formed a single body again.

Olaf patted himself to check he still had everything.

"Thank you, Queen Elsa. Goodbye, Chief Hiccup and dragon Toothless!" The little bundle of snow scampered off, vanishing amid the columns at the sides of the courtyard.

"Did you have something to do with ... that?" He asked her.

"I may have accidentally given him life."

Yup. Headache. Any second now.

"Right, okay. I'll pretend you didn't just say you accidentally gave life to something inanimate, and wait until we're somewhere more comfortable before the full horror of the realization sinks in. Alright?"

Queen Elsa laughed. Actually laughed. She must have thought he was kidding.

"Fair enough, Chief Hiccup. Now, I think it's high time we went inside, don't you think?"

"Do we have to?"

Queen Elsa shot him a bright smile, not at all bothered by his petulance.

"Of course. I want you to meet my sister, Anna."

Hiccup looked at the inner gates of the courtyard that led deeper into the castle, feeling irrationally afraid. He sighed, and steeled

his nerve.

"Right, let's go."

They walked the steps towards the double doors. Their wood was artistically carved in various depictions of climbing flora.

The guards posted next to the gate immediately opened each door in perfect synchronization, with bowed heads and murmurs of acknowledgement for their Queen.

Inside was a hallway. The wallpaper was a deep, wedged red that reached all the way to the high ceiling. Every three meters, chandeliers of three candles each lined the walls, though they were snuffed at this hour. The occasional suit of armor display desk completed the decor. All in all, it was a very warm and inviting place.

A group of people were waiting for them. Hiccup observed them very carefully as they walked towards him and the Queen. Their entrance had been noted and as soon as Elsa saw them, she stopped and allowed the group to approach them.

By this minuscule show of the pecking order, and by the clothes the group wore -the most extravagant yet- Hiccup assumed that these were members of Queen Elsa's government.

Hiccup quite enjoyed the fearful looks they sent Toothless, but none wavered in their step. That was something, at least. Toothless himself seemed to be having fun, because a look at his dragon companion revealed that the reptile had narrowed his eyes and was looking at the men and women like they were dinner. Hiccup knew Toothless was just messing with them, but they didn't.

They were five, three men and two women. One woman was relatively young, black hair caught in a delicate bun, and wore an elaborate yellow dress. The second woman was much older and, unlike the other female, her dress was much simpler, black in color with whites here and there, and wore ... something white and lacy around her head. Hiccup had never seen its likeness before.

The men were more clear cut. The first thing he noticed was the bald, aging man with what was obviously a military suit, made of fine green fabrics and a set of white gloves. The biggest giveaway must have been his hands, clasped firmly behind his back as he stood straight, in the presence of his direct superior. Or maybe the sword strapped to his waist might have given him out, fine. A general, no doubt.

>The second and third men were similar in their dress, looking just like the excessively dressed rich people outside. One of them wore a monocle but other than that, Hiccup's eyes slid right off of them.<p>

"My Queen," began the man with the monocle. Hiccup's opinion of the man immediately dropped upon hearing his voice. High pitched, and almost oozing. "We welcome you back to the castle."

"Ministers, esteemed members of the Inner Council, thank you for this impromptu welcoming committee." Elsa replied, and Hiccup thought he heard a hint of apprehension in her voice. "It is good to see you

all. However, I had been expecting my sister. Is she not in the castle?"

This time, the younger woman replied. "She is, your majesty. You just missed her. Our Ice Master returned shortly before you did and commanded her full attention," she said with a small smile playing on her face, and Hiccup saw Queen Elsa grimace slightly and shake her head.

"We will find her and our wayward official ice deliverer, not to worry. Well then, I will take my leave. I will see you all once court is in session, and properly introduce you all to Chief Hiccup, leader of the Vikings. We've had a long journey, and his has been even longer, so proper procedure will have to wait until he and the dragon Toothless have been properly rested."

Hiccup's opinion of the Queen skyrocketed.

The General took a step forward to address Elsa. "Of course we understand Chief Haddock's need for rest, and we will not impede it. However, your own presence is necessary now, my Queen."

Queen Elsa frowned at this. Hiccup would have to start taking notes on these eyebrows. They must be magical, somehow.

"What is this about, General Mertok, that it can't wait?"

"Your Majesty, the ambassadors from Corona, the Southern Isles, and Grandland are here. You need to speak with them, and soon. It is important."

The general's look towards Hiccup had been anything but subtle. Apparently, this was something not meant for his ears. Who would've thought. The Queen gave a nod, and turned towards the older woman.

"Gertrude, can you take Chief Hiccup and lead him to his quarters? Arrange for the best stables for the dragon Toothless, and-"

"Wait, did you say stable?" Hiccup asked, eyes narrowed. Queen Elsa closed her mouth and looked at him in confusion. Hiccup ignored the council, which were all, with the exception of the woman Gertrude, glaring at him for interrupting the Queen.

"Is it not appropriate lodgings?" She asked slowly, unsure. Hiccup shook his head.

"Not at all. Toothless is not a horse. I have told you before, Toothless goes where I go. I assume a room big enough for the both of us can be found?"

The Queen's confusion didn't clear, but that didn't stop her. She'd apparently learned to take his weird -to her- ways in stride.

"Alright. Gertrude, please lead Chief Hiccup and his dragon to their appropriate quarters."

Turning fully to him, she spoke. "Apologies for having to leave you alone so soon, Chief Hiccup. But as I'm sure a man of your position

understands, duty calls. Get comfortable in your quarters, maybe rest a bit, and perhaps I will see you in the evening."

"That is acceptable." Hiccup nodded at her. She returned his nod and began walking briskly down the left hallway, the four members of her council following her, throwing the occasional glance at the dragon over their shoulders.

He and Toothless were left alone with Gertrude. Now that Hiccup gave her a more thorough once-over, he noted the way her shoulders leaned forward, or the way her head was tipped respectfully forward. This woman was no minister.

"This way please, Chief Haddock." She asked and started leading him to the right. Hiccup followed the woman through the set of doors at the end of the hall into another corridor.

"Excuse me if this is a rude question, but what exactly is your position here, madam Gertrude?" Hiccup asked the elder woman as respectfully as he could manage.

"I am the Head Supervisor of the castle's servants, my Lord. I have served Queen Elsa all her life, and her parents before her."

Hiccup absorbed this, and tried to pay attention to where they were going. They were crossing hallways and wide rooms, meeting the occasional staff along the way. They had obviously been instructed not to run for the hills at the sight of Toothless, but some were less successful in hiding their fear than others. He noted with satisfaction that Toothless had retracted his claws, and left no damage on the obviously expensive carpets. He'd hate to have to explain that to the Queen.

Ten minutes later and by the time they had climbed two sets of stairs, Hiccup was hopelessly lost and merely following Gertrude, hoping she didn't leave him alone to find his way out.

She stopped on a set of doors, similar to two other sets in this particular hallway. The doors were big enough that Toothless could fit through. Gertrude did exactly that, opening both doors wide open, and waved her hand towards the inside.

"Get comfortable, my Lord. Your bath has been arranged in the room beyond those doors over there, and someone will be here after that to show you around, answer your questions and generally be your guide during your stay here. Is there anything I could help you with right now?"

"No thank you, Gertrude. I think I've got it. It was good to meet you."

"And you, my Lord." Yes! He managed to draw a smile from her wizened features. She started ambling away, her slight limp becoming more noticeable when looked at from behind.

Hiccup followed the woman's progress with his eyes, a fond smile on his face. He liked this Gertrude. Perhaps he'd track her down later for a talk.

Moving inside, he closed the doors behind Toothless and inspected

their new living quarters. They were enormous! It was almost as big as all the rooms of his family house on Berk put together. There would be no problem of space. On the far side, glass doors led to a wide balcony, something that Hiccup approved of immensely.

The room was decorated much the same way as the rest of the castle, with welcoming red and blue hues, plenty of candles to keep the place perfectly lit even in nighttime. What must surely have been four beds meshed together by a skilled carpenter stood to his left and, to his even greater joy, a big desk with a full writing set lay on a corner. Ink-pot, empty paper sheets, and even some books.

To his great disappointment, maintaining ink on any but the couple months of summer was impossible on Berk, hence his heavy reliance on charcoal. But no longer!

Through the set of doors was a bathroom, and it was full with strange and weird devices the likes of which he had never seen before. He recognized the bathtub at least, because of its telltale shape.

Never one to back down from discovering the quirks of something new, he decided that now would be a great time to take a bath.

He returned to Toothless, who had been dozing off on the tiles next to the already lit fireplace. He removed the saddlebags, placing them on one side, before getting to work on the dragon's harness. He removed the saddle and the tailfin, leaving the dragon devoid of anything he wasn't hatched with. Toothless crooned his thanks, and closed his eyes, his mouth curled in a soft, unconscious smile.

Hiccup smiled fondly at the Night Fury, and proceeded into the bathroom. He inspected the bathtub carefully. After brief tinkering he realized how it worked, with one lever releasing cold water and the other releasing hot. He closed the drain and set the water to flow in a combination of hot and cold that leaned heavily to the warmer side.

He moved towards the soaps, and there were so many of them! He recognized soap, but next to the tub there were also glass bottles filled with a sort of cream. He put some on his fingers and smelled it. It smelled very much like soap but, more importantly, it smelled heavenly. With a wide smile, Hiccup emptied half the glass bottle into the water. Immediately, it started to bubble over.

There was a chair, so he moved to that and started removing his clothes. He'd already placed his armor pieces with the saddlebags, so he removed the fur vest he wore underneath and then his tunic. His breeches and underwear soon followed, and he was left with nothing but his prosthetic.

With great care, he started unclasping the straps of his metallic foot. The harness, of his own design, reached all the way to his hip, and it took him the better part of three minutes to be removed safely. The metal contraption was placed next to his clothes, and he stood on one leg, holding onto the chair.

He hopped towards the tub, careful to not trip or slide, and checked the water. It was just the perfect temperature and there was a layer

of bubbly soap above it. He cut the water flow and eased himself inside, holding onto the railing some genius had decided to place on the tub's interior.

With a soft sigh, he submerged his body into the water, easing his muscles. He closed his eyes, smiling contentedly. Maybe he could make something like this in Berk. Few Vikings took bathing to such a degree as he did, but even if no one used it other than himself, it would be worth it.

An unspecified amount of time later, the soft sound of footsteps made him open his eyes. Before he had time to ask anything, the door to the bathroom opened, and two servant girls walked inside. They wore short-sleeved dresses, and carried sponges and a bundle of fabrics with them.

As soon as he saw them, Hiccup scrambled to a sitting position, water flying everywhere as he struggled for words.

"What-, who-, how ... what are you doing here_!"

The servant girls looked up at his frantic tone, and confusion settled in their features.

"My Lord," one spoke. "We are here for your bath. Did you not wish to have one?"

"Yes I did, and I don't see how that's any of your business! Leave, for Odin's sake."

"But my lord, this is our duty. We assure you that-"

"I don't give a dragon's claw what your duty is, get out_!" He sincerely hoped his face was not as red as he imagined it would be as he lay in the water, trying and failing to cover himself with the bubbly soap.

The servant girl frowned at him. "My lord, we are professionals."

"Out!"

They mercifully took his subtle hint and, after a brief nod, left the bathroom, closing the doors behind them.

Hiccup collapsed back into the tub, letting out a deep breath, and groaned. He finished his bath soon after that, once his fingers started creasing, and gingerly lifted himself off the tub. He seated himself on the edge, and used the towel that sat next to the tub on a stool to dry himself.

He hopped back to the chair and his clothes, but all he saw was his prosthetic and a bundle of clothes that he'd never seen before.

>
When had they ... no matter. _

He took the time to readjust his prosthetic, and then inspected his new clothes. The undies were easy enough to figure out, and he placed them on in short order. The leggings were tighter than what he was used to, but they fit him and they were soft on the inside, though

rigid on the outside. They were a soft brown color, woven with black thread at the sleeves and up to a point beneath the knees.

The tunic he was given was simple and light green, just how he liked them, but it was intricately woven with golden threads that would separate him from a crowd of peasants. The footwear was the most weird so far. Rather than the fur boots he was used to, he was given a pair of smaller, if no less snug, shoes made of hard leather.

He smirked. What was he supposed to do with the left one? In the end, he wore the right one and left the other one where he found it.

Dressed, he walked outside. Immediately he noticed the new arrival in his quarters. A young man, a few years younger than himself, blond hair cut short and styled to the left side, dressed in the white and blue uniform that on the way here he had learned to associate with the assistant staff.

"Greetings, my Lord."

"Greetings. And who might you be?"

"I am Arnod, and I will be your guide during your stay here." Hiccup was pleased to know that Arnod did not steal fearful glances at Toothless, neither was the dragon glaring at the young servant. By the looks of it, the Night Fury was sleeping.

Then again, who knows how long he had stood here, waiting for him. Maybe he and the onyx creature had reached a sort of agreement.

"Arnod," he said, tasting the name. "Do you mind if I call you Ernie, Ernie?"

Ernie blinked, and then bowed his head. "Not at all, my Lord."

"That's great, because I don't mind that you're going to call me Hiccup from now on, either."

"I am?" Ernie asked.

"You sure are."

"Very well, Hiccup."

"Good, good," Hiccup nodded encouragingly. "Finally some progress. Now, tell me what exactly it is you're going to be doing for me."

"Well, I am here to act as your guide and to answer any of your questions. I will be available to you most hours of the day. I have been given leave to show you around, give you a tour of the castle and the city, explain some of our history, etcetera."

"I see," Hiccup said, nodding. "Well, that's good, then. I was invited here by the Queen, but she had to leave unexpectedly and I'm starting to believe that this won't be a rare occurrence."

"Her Majesty the Queen is very busy, doing her very best to keep our great kingdom prosperous and happy."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure she is. Tell me, Ernie, what is there to do on Arendelle? What can you show me?"

"Well Hiccup, that's a very broad question. Do you have anything specific in mind? Something you'd like to see first?"

Hiccup thought about it, pursing his brow. What did he want to do first? On his very first day on a completely new and strange kingdom?

His eyes landed on the saddlebags and Toothless' harness. After a few seconds of contemplation, he smiled.

He turned towards Ernie, wide grin still in place.

"Say, Ernie," he asked, "Do you guys have a smithy?"

***~H~~**

End Notes: If anyone has questions or would like a clarification, ask me in a review.

4. Elsa 2

Note: I wasn't planning on releasing this so early, but I'm a good few chapters ahead, plus I'm not sure when I'll get a good chance to post it if I don't do so now.

Thanks to the guys at the DLP forums for helping with this.

**~HE~

>A Chance Encounter, Chapter 4
>~HE~

Elsa sighed, rubbing her eyes tiredly. She managed to plaster one last, incredibly fake smile on her face and direct it at the members of her council as they left, bowing their heads to her before exiting her office.

The orange light of the setting sun filtered in through the open window of her working space. Her gaze fell on the star itself, slowly falling behind the horizon. Her chair and desk was in front of the open window, so all she had to do was redirect her chair and she was gazing out over the fjord.

Her office was situated at the central building of the castle, a few floors below but still relatively close to her private quarters, which lay at the topmost tower. Her office was a relatively large room, sporting the same dark red wallpaper as the rest of the castle, but most of walls' surfaces were hidden by the ceiling high libraries that lined them. Opposite from the entrance was her great oaken desk, and behind it the wide window. On the sides of the room, a pair of couches waited for guests and a pair of padded chairs also rested in front of Elsa's desk. On the right side of the room lay another pair of doors, smaller, that led to a refreshing area.

Her light purple dress felt rumpled over her body, the white sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her hair felt unmade and she felt sweat slick her skin, even though she'd had a quick bath before the flurry of meetings began. It had taken her most of the day to bring the issues anywhere close to solved. At least she had the presence of mind to cancel court for today. She didn't think that she'd have been able to take it, otherwise.

She felt drained and mentally tired. She had to meet each ambassador separately, and then at least a dozen other meetings with all kinds of combinations of ambassadors and council members, ending everything with a meeting between herself and her ministers to recap the day. She had yet to speak to Anna, she had no clue what mischief Olaf had unknowingly undertaken, and the gods only knew what Chief Hiccup and his dragon were up to in her absence. She'd have to deal with all of them before she got any semblance of rest. She didn't know who she preferred to tackle first.

A soft knock was heard on the door of her office, and the door opened slightly, not waiting for a reply. Her sister's face poked in, scanning the room for the Queen.

Well, the choice was just taken out of her hands. The first fell right into her lap.

"Yes, Anna, come in." She said, rolling her eyes with a soft smile. Her sister had the good grace to blush. She was wearing a dress matching Elsa's own, though with soft brown and light yellow as its choice of colors. Her brown hair was held up in a braid not dissimilar to Elsa's own.

"Sorry." She mumbled as she closed the door and walked closer. Elsa rose and walked around her desk, accepting her sister's brief but affectionate hug. The two sisters smiled at each other, years of pent up emotion spoken in the silence between them. Holding hands, they walked over to the dark red couch laying at the left side of Elsa's office. They sat down next to each other, softly holding their hands between them.

"I didn't see you today." Elsa said, a slight accusing edge to her voice. She had missed her sister, and some of her cheer would've helped tremendously during the long day.

"I'm sorry Elsa, but Kristoff came right before you did, and he had been away for three weeks! I had to go with him. And then when I looked for you I was told you were in important meetings and shouldn't be disturbed unless it was really important."

"Don't worry, I don't hold it against you. It's just that I could have used you in there. I swear days like these just seem to suck the life out of me."

"Oh you'll be fine. You've been saying the same thing for the last three years."

"And yet I still hold hope that you'll believe me one day."

"I will when you get married."

Elsa grimaced, not particularly enjoying this part of Anna's humor.
"Speaking of marriage, where is our resident ice master?"

Anna unclasped one of her hands only to wave it at her dismissively.
"He took Sven to the city for his deliveries. Never mind that, tell
me all about your trip. What's this I hear about you, a Viking and a
dragon?"

"What, didn't you hear the punchline to that one?"

Anna glared at her.

"I'm serious. I think I heard the staff telling it earlier. At least
they work fast, right?"

"Elsa!" Anna said, drawing out the word to a whine. Elsa
grinned.

"Fine, fine. I'll tell you. Everything was going fine until about
three days into our journey, when we stopped abruptly and half my men
went into the forest. The captain told me that there was a dragon
sleeping in the woods and that he wanted it dead before we
proceeded."

"Sounds reasonable," Anna said. "Though I'm guessing things didn't
work out?"

"Not at all. We saw the thing fly off the treetops and let out this
terrifying roar. It flew up, and then headed straight for us. A group
of archers went ahead and unleashed a volley just as it was getting
close. I have no idea how it saw the arrows in time, but it did. I've
never seen anything move as fast, Anna. Ever. One moment it was
there, then next it wasn't. It rolled out of the way. It flew up,
higher and faster than I thought possible. After it reached the
clouds, it turned and basically fell towards the archers. Thankfully
I realized what it was doing and blocked the dragonfire. From that
moment on, I was the sole recipient of its attacks."

"Alright, I'm following so far. So when does this viking king come
in?"

"Chief."

"Excuse me?"

"Vikings have chiefs, not Kings."

Anna rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Fine! When does this viking chief
come in?"

"He was always there."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he was on the dragon."

She let her sister process this. When her eyes widened, she knew that
she must have caught on.

"You don't mean..."

"I mean he was riding it. Saddle and everything. He was directing the dragon."

"Wow! So he attacked you?"

"We fought." Elsa allowed.

The Princess' eyes frowned at her.

"You froze a viking king?"

"_Chief_."

"You froze a viking _chief_?"

"Not .. exactly."

"Elsa! Isn't this sort of the worst diplomacy possible? We talked about this years ago. You can't go around freezing foreign royalty! Then again, he did attack you, so--"

"Anna, stop." Elsa cut her off. Anna closed her mouth and looked at her sister, noting the seriousness of the Queen's gaze. She waited. "You're missing something important. Backtrack, think it over."

The Princess took her sister's advice to heart, and Elsa saw her brow furrow in thought.

"You said he was riding the dragon. So it's safe to assume that he was nearby when your men attacked it?"

Elsa nodded encouragingly. "From what I saw the last two nights, he sleeps under its wing."

Anna blinked, filing the weird information away for later. "So, technically, he didn't attack you at all, did he?"

The Queen shook her head. "We attacked them while they were sleeping. One could say that they were defending themselves."

"So what happened? You say you didn't freeze him? But you brought him and the dragon here, so you didn't kill him. How did you end the fight?"

Elsa raised a delicate eyebrow and smiled despite herself. "What makes you think I won?"

Anna's silence was deafening and her open mouthed shock greatly amusing. The blond repressed a smile. It wouldn't do for her sister to think she was joking.

"You ... you didn't win?"

"No," Elsa shook her head. "I went full out, summoned a blizzard and everything. I lost."

"But-," Anna sputtered. "But, you're Elsa, the Snow Queen! You created a complete ice castle on a whim! You accidentally brought about eternal winter!"

Elsa grimaced again. "Thanks for reminding me."

"My point is, you can do almost anything. What stopped you from freezing them?"

"Oh, I tried. I tried everything, but they were just so fast, Anna. I couldn't land anything more than a glancing blow. I've never seen anything move like that."

"Okay," Anna said, breathing deeply. She was visibly trying to swallow the fact that Elsa had lost a direct fight. "So, you lost. How badly are we speaking?"

Elsa winced. "Pretty badly. You'd think that a man riding a dragon would go for the brute force approach, but no. I had to go pick a fight with what, if my luck is holding, must probably be the only devious dragon rider in existence. He had a plan and I fell right for it like a rookie." Elsa shuddered as she remembered the glint of the arrow's tip, inches away from piercing her brain. The heat of the fireblasts, chipping away at her barriers of magical ice.

"So how did you not get mauled or burned? Didn't the dragon get you?"

Elsa shook her head again. "It wasn't the dragon. It was the rider. I was disoriented from a fall -don't ask- and my attention was on the dragon. Before I knew it, the chief tackled me from the air."

Anna's confusion was palpable. "I'm not following."

"He wasn't on the dragon. When I noticed that, I looked around for him. He was flying, Anna. I have no idea how, but he was flying by himself. He tackled me and pressed this dagger in my throat."

She stopped when she heard her sister's gasp. Anna had brought her hands to her mouth in horror. Perhaps unnecessarily, Elsa raised her chin, showing off the minuscule line of scabbed blood that served as proof of her words. The princess gasped again.

"No!"

"Oh yes."

"And how did you escape?"

"I didn't."

"Well he obviously didn't kill you!" Wow, she was getting snappy. She must have been more upset than Elsa thought. She decided to not torture her any longer.

"He let me go."

Anna stared at her again, blinking.

"He just ... let you go? After you basically attacked him for what must have seemed to him as no reason at all and went full blizzard on him, he left you go?"

"Yup. he chewed me out for attacking him and his dragon, made me promise to not do it again and released me."

"Is he cute?"

Elsa's thought process ground to a halt, as she tried to make sense of her sister's reasoning.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Of course it has! It has everything to do with it, don't you see?"

"Don't you start again." Elsa said, pointing an accusing finger at her sister. "After the last fiasco, you promised not to interfere. I also remember that the agreement was that no teasing is allowed, either."

Anna raised her hands palms up in a show of non-aggression. "I know, I know. Not interfering or teasing in the slightest. But I'm just saying, by the way you didn't reply, you must find him cute!"

"I'm going to ignore that little piece of flawed logic and pretend that this particular part of our conversation never happened. Not to mention that even if I did, it wouldn't matter, because he doesn't seem to think I'm attractive."

Anna brought her hands to her mouth, open in silent horror.

"No!"

Elsa nodded. "Yes. He wasn't exactly rude about it, but he refused to ride with me, instead preferring to ride a supply horse, and later professed doubts that I would have marriage proposals by anyone."

"That brute!"

"I will also remind you that you'll be able to judge his 'cuteness' by yourself when you see him, although I'm not sure Kristoff would appreciate that."

Anna waved her off again. "He's a man. He'll get over it. I still don't get it though. So he got the jump on you, okay. Couldn't you have frozen him at any moment after that?"

"Of course I could," Elsa said dismissively, "I could have frozen him anytime from the moment the knife left my throat and every moment of our journey after that. Any minute he's not on the dragon, I can freeze them both. And even if the dragon is too much for me, I suspect that it wouldn't be as much trouble as it could with the chief on it."

"Exactly, so why didn't you?"

"You mean besides the fact that it would bring all of the Vikings down on our heads?" At Anna's encouraging nod, Elsa sighed and continued. "Because it would be pointless. He let me live. I'm not sure if you fully understand it yet, Anna. He had me, defenseless and at his mercy and he simply released me after trusting my word that I wouldn't attack him again. Besides, to attack him when he's not on

his dragon would be like him attacking me if I couldn't use my ice powers."

Elsa saw her sister's wide smile and pointed a finger at her again. "Not a word." Anna closed her mouth, still smiling. "I know what you're thinking, we've discussed this. It's a bad thought. Take it, bind it up." Obligingly, Anna mimed fishing something out of her head with her hand and letting it fall into something she was holding on her other hand. Then she mimed tying the imaginary satchel with an imaginary cord. Done, she showed off the imaginary satchel to her sister.

"Good," Elsa approved. "Now throw it away." Anna complied and pretended to throw the satchel behind her back.

"Alright, thought forgotten, tell me more. You brought him here after that?"

"And believe you me, it wasn't easy. He would've left then and there if I hadn't persuaded him."

"Why didn't you? Let him leave, I mean."

Elsa glared at her sister. "Are you kidding? And let it be known that we attacked a viking chief unprovoked, who then proceeded to wipe the floor with me? Do you have any idea of the political ramifications of such an act? No, there was no other choice. We have to show him that we are anything resembling good people, so that he won't make fools of us in the international community, bring a flock of dragons down on our heads, or do something equally ridiculous."

"Fine, fine, point made. Good impression, got it. So, what is he like? I've yet to meet him and you've been traveling together for, what, two days now?"

"More or less." Elsa confirmed.

"So, spill!"

Elsa took some time to gather her thoughts. "We didn't talk all that much. He's very guarded and evasive, though I suppose it's not without cause. I didn't learn a lot."

"You don't seem to like him. Is he a bad sort?"

Elsa shrugged lightly. "I'm not certain. I get mixed signals, not all of which are good. One thing I know for sure, though, is that he's nothing like anyone I've ever met. We both have to get to know him a bit before he decides to leave."

"I'll bet we do."

Elsa glared at her insufferable sister again, who didn't even have the grace to stop smirking. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. She closed her mouth and turned towards the door, calling for whoever it was to come in.

A servant woman opened the door and got inside, bowing respectfully to the two royals. "My Queen, Princess."

The two sisters returned the gesture with nods of their heads. "What is it, Alisa?"

"Your majesty, some of the staff are getting ... restless, regarding the dragon."

Elsa exchanged a look with Elsa, before turning back to Alisa.
"What's going on?"

"The dragon has been walking around the hallways your majesty. Poking inside rooms and startling the staff and the guests."

"Has anyone been hurt?"

"No, my Queen. But it's been going on for some hours and not everyone in the staff can handle the strain on their nerves. Also, I'm not sure how much longer the guards will keep their cool."

"How did it get out?"

"It, um, rattled the door until a passing servant opened it, my Queen."

"I see." Elsa replied.

"Are we going to the dragon?" Anna said, clapping her hands together with a wide smile. Elsa sent her a sharp look.

"We are definitely not going to the dragon. Not without Chief Hiccup there. Do you know where he is, Alisa?"

"Chief Haddock left in the morning, your majesty. Arnod is with him."

"Well, where did they go?"

"I do not know, your majesty."

"Find out where they went and send someone to notify me."

Alisa bowed her head. "Yes, my Queen." With that, she turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Anna turned to her sister, wide smile ever present on her face.
"There's a dragon skulking around the castle?"

"Apparently."

"And we need to find the only one who can control the dangerous beast?"

"According to Chief Hiccup, the dragon Toothless is only dangerous when he wants to be."

"But?"

"It's not that I don't trust his word, exactly, it's just that ... " Elsa trailed off, unsure how to voice her thoughts.

"You'd rather not test it with lives at stake?"

Elsa nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, at the very least, this viking is making things interesting already. I was beginning to get bored."

Only a groan replied to that, causing Anna's smile to widen even more. A minute later, Elsa thought of something else.

"If you're going to speak with him, there are a few things you should know so you can avoid the pitfalls I fell into."

"Ouch?"

"Quite. First of all, no matter what you think of it, refrain from saying anything that could be taken as offensive regarding the dragon. Chief Hiccup is very defensive of him and seems to view him rather like a family member or a close friend."

Anna frowned. "Okay, I suppose I'll find out why soon enough. Next?"

"I'm serious. If you treat the dragon like a normal animal he'll clamp down immediately. He talks to it. And from the looks of it, the thing replies back."

The princess rolled her eyes. "I have experience with people overly attached to their animal friends. I'll be fine. Next?"

"He has a prosthetic foot. When I asked, all he told me about it was that he lost it on a battle. I'm not sure how sensitive a subject it is, but be cautious."

"Alright, noted. Anything else?"

"Yeah. He's the leader of his tribe, but he acts nothing like any royal I ever met. He was dressed like a warrior, he did everything by himself, he slept on the ground next to his dragon. I'm not sure what to think."

"Now I want to meet him even more."

Elsa was saved from replying when the door was knocked. Once again she prompted whoever it was inside. The composed form of Arnod entered, bowed and folded his arms behind his back.

"My Queen."

"Arnod." Elsa nodded. "It's good to see you. How has Chief Hiccup been today?"

"Hiccup has been ... interesting, my Queen."

Anna raised an eyebrow at the young servant. "Hiccup?"

"Hiccup insisted I call him that, in return for calling me Ernie."

Elsa and Anna blinked, turned their heads to look at each other, before looking at Arnod in synchronization. Equal grins split their

faces.

"If you don't stop it now, Ernie, I'm afraid it's going to stick." Anna informed him amusedly. Ernie bowed his head.

"I am aware, your majesty. It is ... not as unfortunate as it could be."

Elsa decided that, funny as this was, perhaps they should get to business.

"Ernie, where is your charge?"

This seemed to make Ernie a bit nervous, as he shuffled his legs a bit and looked around.

"With your permission, my Queen."

Elsa nodded her head and the young man moved closer, leaning over to whisper in her ear. Elsa turned her head to let him lean closer and listened attentively. Anna watched closely as Elsa's brow furrowed more and more.

After Ernie stopped speaking and returned to his straight posture, Elsa brought her fingers higher to rub at her eyes, feeling the headache that had been building all day finally bloom.

Eventually, she stopped abusing her eyes and got up from the couch. She looked at Anna and jerked her head towards the door.

"Come on, Anna. Let's go find us a Viking."

~E~

Fifteen minutes later, Anna, Elsa and Arnod had left the palace and wandered through the roads of Arendelle. Anna did not know where they were going, but Elsa didn't doubt that this only added to her fun. As they walked, people bowed and stepped to the side, letting them pass with jovial greetings, which they returned.

Eventually, they left the main roads of Arendelle and approached the outskirts of the city. Here was the craftsman's district. The traders were situated in and around the port, the center of the city held most of the houses, and the outskirts were the various builders, craftsmen and workers.

They turned the corner and there, two buildings down, was the blacksmith's shop. It was a stone building like the others, but not as tall, having no more than one floor. It was, however, wider. The front of the shop, the part customers could enter, held the seller's booth and row upon row of tools, weapons and other loose ends for buyers to browse. Through a door on the back of this room, lay the actual smithy, taking most of the building.

They reached the entrance and Ernie opened the wooden door, bowing his head as he waited for the sisters to get inside. As they did so, their eyes fell upon the rows of swords, halberds, the barrels of arrows, the hammers, nails and various other for-sale items. The repeated sound of steel hammering against steel could be heard, but the booth, however, was empty.

"Where is the seller?" Anna asked.

"Hiccup rented the smith for today, so technically they are closed." Ernie informed them.

"He rented it? The whole day?"

Ernie nodded. "He's been here ever since, though he did visit the leatherworker to buy several pieces of tough leather."

Elsa pursed her lips and opened the door that led deeper into the building.

>Inside was a different world. The oppressing atmosphere got to her immediately, the heat hitting her like a physical blow. She let out a harsh breath as she got used to the higher temperature, feeling her sister do the same.<p>

The smithy was an organized mess. Several tables were arrayed around the room, tools and half-finished projects laying there. Equally, the walls were all full with either tools, products, or machinery. Parts of the smithy were separate rooms, probably storage rooms. There were three different sets of forges, each with its own anvil, water barrel, and other assorted equipment.

Two of the forges were lit. In one, a small piece of metal was heating up. The other was empty, but the pounding on the anvil in front of it was almost deafening.

Chief Hiccup wore the tunic he was given, but over it he had placed a heavy leather apron, and his hands were gloved with equally tough material. On his right hand he held the tong, which in turn kept the glowing piece of metal he was working on still, while his left held a medium sized hammer, raining down blows with the face of the hammer and slowly shaping the metal as he wished.

They watched him work for a minute, all three of them aware that he was so focused on his work that he did not notice them entering, as the door was slightly behind him and to the right. Elsa studied him, noticing the furrow of his brow as he concentrated, along with the long lines of sweat from standing so close to the furnace. Scouring the tables around him with her eyes, she saw several weird things. The saddle he had used on the dragon was taking up a table almost by itself, immaculate and clean, and discarded pieces of ruined leather lay around it. On another table, several pieces of what she assumed was steel were placed. They must have been pieces, for they had no discernible use that Elsa could think of. She recognized the small rings, but she could not guess as to what the other pieces were for. There were slim and long pieces, others were curved, some had hooks or twists other patterns. A dagger and a sheathed sword also lay on that table, as well.

Elsa cleared her throat during a lull between strikes. Chief Hiccup startled and nearly dropped his hammer, but saved it at the last second. He turned his head and looked at them.

"Hello." He said.

"Good evening, Chief Hiccup." Elsa replied. She saw the chief's eyes go from her to Ernie and then finally land on Anna. She was sporting

a small smile and a speculative look in her eyes.

"Princess Anna, I assume." He said before turning back to his work, straightening his hold and resuming his pounding. "Excuse me for not being able to greet you properly, but this needs to be done now." He said, his voice strained from the exertion.

"Fret not," Anna replied. "It was us that intruded upon your work. I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunity to get to know each other."

The chief glanced at them and briefly returned Anna's friendly smile, before focusing his gaze back at the piece of metal.

"What are you doing, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Some long overdue repairs. I haven't seen a smithy in weeks. Some pieces needed replacement altogether. I also fixed Toothless' saddle, which was getting pretty frayed. There's still the harness to do, the tailfin, and my prosthetic."

Elsa and Anna exchanged looks. Ernie looked not at all surprised. He must have had a similar discussion earlier. Anna peered at the prosthetic curiously, studying the metal contraption. Rather than being a single piece of metal, it was comprised of several smaller pieces connected together. Three parts touched the ground. The middle one was the widest, and though slim, it covered in width about as much as a regular foot would. Two smaller pieces were in front and behind it, and these pieces would move whenever the chief leaned forward or backwards, up to a point.

"What's wrong with it?" Anna asked, not able to contain her curiosity.

"Can you see the three springs, above the pieces touching the floor?" He asked, moving his foot closer to them, but not looking away from the anvil. Anna studied it, and noticed the springs he was talking about. She saw two of them, contracting and lengthening with his movement.

"Yeah."

"They're close to their limit. I need new ones. That and some general maintenance."

"Why did you not commission the blacksmith to do it for you?" Elsa questioned. The Chief turned to give her an incredulous gaze.

"Are you kidding? I don't trust anyone else with my gear. Well, maybe Gobber, but he taught me everything I know. Plus; mister Frey, for all his expertise, does not know how to make what I'm making."

Argus Frey was the blacksmith, Elsa suddenly remembered. Who this Gobber character was, she did not know. Probably the blacksmith of Berk. Why the future chief felt it necessary to learn such things as metalwork and leatherwork, Elsa did not know.

"I have to admit though, it's nice to work in a place with such an abundance of steel. Iron is good, but not always the best."

They had nothing to say to that, knowing nothing about the ways of the smith. They watched him work for a minute in silence.

"Dinner will be soon. Everyone will be eager to meet you." Anna said. Dinnertime at the castle was a grand affair, with all nobles that stayed at the castle currently invited. It wasn't a daily event, but these days the castle was full of visiting diplomats and noblemen from around the kingdom.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to make it. This will keep me well into the night." The Chief said, as he stopped his work on the small steel piece. He released the tong and placed the hammer on the table next to him. He got another tong from the tool table and moved to the other forge, where a long piece of metal shimmered in, glowing a light orange. He picked it up carefully, and moved to the water barrel. With one swift move, he plunged the hot metal inside and left it there. Hurriedly, he returned to his hammer and anvil.

"Did you come here solely to introduce me to your lovely sister?" Chief Hiccup asked, sparing her a quick glance.

"No, as a matter of fact. We need you to reign in your dragon."

The viking chief paused, hammer raised above his head, but collected himself swiftly, resuming his work, turning the hot piece this way and that as he drew it out.

"What's he done this time?" He asked, exasperation in his voice.

"Nothing, exactly. He's just been prowling the castle and the staff are getting restless with an unchecked dragon moving around unsupervised."

Elsa noticed his frown form and spoke again, before he could. "I understand you have full faith in Toothless, but give the staff some time to share your views before you let him stroll around like that, would you?"

He didn't speak for a few seconds.

"You're right," he said eventually. "However, I cannot come now. All you have to do is get him to our quarters, tell him to stay there until I get back and close the door."

Elsa glanced at Anna, her sister doing the same. "And if he doesn't want to come?" Anna asked.

"Nah, he'll come." The Chief said confidently. "Just bait him with a few fish and he'll follow you around like a hungry puppy. He's crazy for the stuff."

"Any particular preferences?"

"Don't mind about his favorites, any kind of fish will do. Big fish, but not too big for him to swallow whole."

"You are certain he will follow without aggressive moves?" Elsa asked, images of the dragon lunging and eating her whole hand along with the fish flashing through her eyes.

"Yes, I'm certain. He won't go for it until you give it to him."

"Very well. Are you absolutely certain that I can't convince you to come to dinner?"

He flashed her an apologetic smile, his face flushed from the heat and the exertion.

"Sorry, but no. I have to finish this. Flying with Toothless was getting dangerous, the gear needs repairing."

"Then I insist that you take breakfast with us, tomorrow morning." This would work better, considering breakfast was a much more private affair, usually consisting of only herself and Anna, with the occasional minister, royal, or close friend joining in.

"What time will it be?"

"Usual time is eight thirty."

"Huh. I usually get up at dawn. Alright though, I'll make it." Elsa got up that early, too. It was no surprise, really. People like them did not get to sleep in. The time of breakfast was set more for her sister's sake than hers.

"We'll be looking forward to it," Anna warned, her eyes dancing with humor and completely ignoring Elsa's cautioning look. "I really want to get to know you."

The Chief smiled at Anna again. A wide, genuine smile that Elsa had not seen directed at her at any point before. She felt a stab of something which she couldn't discern. Annoyance, irrational irritation ... maybe jealousy?

Ridiculous.

It was just that he seemed so open with everyone except her that was setting her on edge. She'd sacrificed a lot to be so friendly, and he'd better appreciate it, damn it all!

"I'll be looking forward to it as well, Princess Anna."

Everyone feeling the obvious dismissal, Elsa and Anna bid their goodbyes and left the smith to his work, the steady sound of his hammer following them out. Ernie straightened and faced them.

"Apologies my Queen, Princess, but I'd better stay here. Who knows when Hiccup finishes. It wouldn't do for him to get lost on the way back."

"It's alright, Ernie." Elsa assured him. "Just make sure he gets there tomorrow."

Ernie bowed. "Yes, my Queen."

"Bye, Ernie!" Anna waved as they walked away, back towards the castle.

"Well? Impressions?" Elsa prodded. Anna looked into the distance, speculative look on her face.

"I'm not sure. Too early to tell. He seemed ..." she fished for words and Elsa let her think in peace. "... busy." she finished lamely.

"Indeed. I have to say, I've never seen a royal do something so ..."

"Hands-on?" Anna guessed.

"Yes. Goes to show how much we know about the Vikings."

"Well, Arendelle is far enough away that we haven't had raids, nor trade. We can't really be blamed for it. He didn't know anything about us either, right?"

"Right." Elsa nodded. They were approaching the bridge now. Soon, it would close for the day, to be opened again at dawn.

"And now?"

"Now we have a dragon to feed." Anna's excited squeal made Elsa roll her eyes, a fond smile gracing her features at her sister's antics.

For a few minutes, they walked in silence, before Anna broke it.

"I _knew _he would be cute."

"_Anna!_"

~E~

They headed deeper into the castle, but westwards, towards the working areas. Therein lay the kitchens. Elsa had quickly found and employed one of the servants to fetch her three big fish. If her request made the woman curious, she didn't show it. She only bowed and headed deeper into the kitchens, towards the storage rooms and the cold rooms, where the fish were kept, constantly on ice.

Soon, the Queen of Arendelle was walking next to the Princess, carrying a tray with, to her great amusement, three large haddock fishes. She drew weird looks from the people they passed in the hallways, but no one questioned what she was planning to do with the fish as she walked confidently to where she had been told the dragon was last.

"Why are we doing this ourselves? Not that I mind, but I'd have expected you to send someone else. You're not used to personally feed every visitor's pet."

Elsa's face hardened. "I'm doing this personally because no one else will be able to properly defend themselves in case the dragon gets aggressive."

Anna didn't ask again.

Two floors up, they found the dragon. Anna stilled the moment they turned the corner of the corridor and saw it. The Princess' hand found her sleeve and held it tightly as she took the great beast in. It was turned slightly away from them, inspecting a vase full of flowers set on a windowsill, nostrils flaring as it sniffed at it. Its wings were folded in on itself and its tail was lazily flicking left and right. Even its expression seemed, well, bored.

The dragon abruptly sneezed, its head snapping downwards. It snarled at the offending flower and backed away a few steps, body bent at the back like a cat, as it hissed at the vase.

It was all quite comical, but neither of the royal girls were even smiling.

"What do you think?" Elsa whispered to her sister, not sure if the dragon had noticed them, but unwilling to give them away in case it had not.

"Its terrifying alright but ... I don't know. I expected something a bit ... bigger."

"It looks much bigger with those wings open." Elsa said.

The dragon snapped its head towards them, its various ears standing straight up, a look of great interest on its face as it sniffed the air, its nostrils flaring visibly. When the beast's eyes landed on the haddocks its eyes widened and it practically bounded towards them, closing the distance between them in five long strides.

Anna started shaking next to her, but Elsa stood firm, magic coursing through her body, preparing to freeze the beast where it stood at the first sign of aggression.

It seemed an unnecessary precaution, because as soon as it reached them, the dragon stopped. Its gaze was locked on the haddocks, its mouth open and tongue lolling out, panting like ... a hungry puppy.

The beast's eyes alternated between the fish and Elsa's own eyes, obviously smart enough to understand that they were for him but unsure of what she was going to do. Elsa had never been this close to the dragon before and his deep, inquisitive look made her hesitate for a few seconds.

She shook her head to clear it and took a few steps back. The dragon let out a sad little croon and dogged her steps, looking pitifully at the fish.

"Follow us." Elsa commanded. The dragon's eyes snapped towards her instantly, and she saw intelligence in that gaze. "You understand me?" She spoke again. "Follow us."

With that, she took a few more steps. The dragon obligingly followed her, not letting the distance between them grow, still drooling over the fish. Anna had overcome her slight panic attack, but was still glued at her side, watching the dragon avidly, though the Night Fury was completely ignoring her.

Elsa felt sure enough to turn her back to the dragon, but still held

the tray to the side so he could see it. She started walking and could feel the dragon's surprisingly light steps as he followed them.

Within minutes, they had arrived to Chief Hiccup's assigned quarters and Anna pushed the doors, which were unlocked, open. She and the dragon moved into the spacious room, Anna closing the wide doors behind them.

>Elsa stopped in the middle of the room and turned. The dragon had sat on its belly, staring up at her through sad, wide eyes, ears flat against its hide. Chief Hiccup really wasn't kidding with that puppy quip. How a dragon could look so pitiful was beyond her.<p>

"Here." She said as she set the tray down, before taking a few steps back, closer to the bed. She watched the dragon sniff at the fish. Then, he opened his mouth.

By Winter! She thought inwardly. He really was toothless! But, she could've sworn she'd seen-

The dragon's mouth was suddenly full of razor sharp teeth, and he snatched up a fish, tossing it in the air and gulping it down in one smooth move.

Teeth.

So the beast had retractable teeth. Now the name Toothless made much more sense. Elsa shook her head and left the dragon at its meal. She watched him lick his lip-less mouth with his tongue, clearly satisfied.

She looked around the room, to see how the chief had settled. It was still their first day here, so the room was pretty much the same as before they got here, but traces of their presence could be seen. Over by the desk, the few books that had been stacked there, consisting of a basic history book on the kingdom of Arendelle and some of the more famous literally works, had been moved around and probably skimmed. Approaching the desk, she saw that the ink pot had been moved and that one of the paper sheets had lines on it. Reaching the desk, she inspected it more clearly, taking the sheet and bringing it to eye level. It was the castle, surprisingly. It was an angle that she recognized as the one from the hill above Arendelle. Though the sketch was rushed, it was surprisingly detailed. The castle was only half-formed, the sketch obviously unfinished.

So the chief could draw, too? Interesting.

Elsa took another look around, her eyes finally landing on the chief's luggage, which consisted of four saddlebags. Standing there on the ground, they seemed surprisingly solid and heavy. How much faster would the dragon have flown without them?

Her eye caught something poking out one of the pockets of the dark leather bags. It seemed like the edge of a notebook. She approached with measured steps, held the notebook between her fingers and tugged. The bag gave and the notebook was released.

Elsa inspected it. It was made of dark leather and it lacked a hard back or front cover, to the point where it could be flexed this way and that without tearing. Practical, she thought.

She really, really shouldn't. She shouldn't have removed it from the bag in the first place. It was unbecoming of a queen to snoop around the belongings of her guests. She was not a gossip, she shouldn't do this.

She looked at the notebook, carressing its soft leather cover with her fingers. What secrets lay inside? What insights into the man that confused her so?

Giving in to her curiosity, she opened the first page. On the left side, a single line of runes that she couldn't read. The writing was, surprisingly, with charcoal. She couldn't recognize the runes, but it must have been a declaration of property, like with most personal notebooks or journals. The actual first page was filled with such runes. While they were fascinating in their shapes, she couldn't read them, so she turned the page. This one was also mostly filled with runes, but there was also the diagram of what appeared to be a piece of equipment. Arrows directed explanations to various parts of the object.

Turning another page, she saw that this one was mostly sketches, with a few lines of runes here and there. It was a detailed side view of the dragon Toothless, wearing a set of harness and saddle different than the one she'd seen on him. She admired the expertly drawn sketch for a minute, before turning another page.

Goldmine. This was full of sketches of people. She recognized the chief, standing in the middle. She couldn't mistake him because of his prosthetic and body structure, but it was a surprisingly inaccurate sketch. She guessed that it was harder to draw oneself than it was to draw others. The other people she couldn't recognize, so she began to inspect them.

A growl interrupted her before she could really take the drawing in, and she froze on the spot. She looked to the side and there was the dragon, eyes narrowed and ear flaps raised in a show of aggression. His mouth was half open as he growled and his name was grossly inaccurate, in this instance. His stance was drawn back, like a cat ready to pounce, as he glared at her.

"Elsa?" Anna asked, clearly alarmed and worried, from the other side of the dragon.

"Stay there." Elsa said. She saw the dragon's eyes alternate between her and the notebook in her hand. The dragon once again looked at the notebook, before snorting.

Elsa closed the book and raised it to eye level. The dragon followed the movement with his head, still growling lowly.

"Is this about the notebook?" Elsa asked. The dragon snorted again, which Elsa didn't know how to take, before jerking its head to the side. Elsa looked to her left where the dragon had pointed. He had jerked his head towards the bags.

"I'm sorry that I took your master's property." Elsa said, slowly, ignoring Anna's gasp. "I'll put it back now, okay?"

The dragon obviously did not reply, but it didn't make any other move

as she approached the bags again and slowly replaced the notebook where she found it, not taking her eyes off the beast in case she needed to freeze him.

Once the book was safely where it had been and Elsa had straightened, the aggression left the dragon's posture. His eyes widened innocently again, his left ear flap lowered, his brow lost the hostile frown and he sat back on his two back limbs and tail. He regarded her with open curiosity. Elsa didn't waver from the stare, landing the same on the Night Fury. How could an animal go from a posture that radiated menace and hostility to one of a child inspecting something shiny in the span of a few seconds?

The dragon stopped staring at her, instead bringing his head lower, to the empty silver tray. He sniffed and crooned sadly. He raised his head again to look at her, before sniffing again. He started moving, getting closer to her. Elsa tensed, ready to unleash her magic, but she sensed no threatening intent from the dragon.

Nevertheless, she instinctively stepped backwards as the beast approached her. Its head was snaking this way and that as it sniffed the air. Elsa's vision was suddenly covered with a barrage of fire and she flinched as memory overtook her. She backpedaled faster, striking the front of the bed with her rear and unable to walk any further. The dragon reached her and its head was inches from her. His mouth was closed, but he was sniffing her and trying to look behind her and in the folds of her dress.

"I think it's looking for more fish." Anna whispered, having followed Elsa's movements from the side.

Elsa saw the dragon's clearly inquisitive look and eager sniffing and decided that Anna must be right.

"I don't have any more." She declared, hoping the dragon understood her. He must have, because he abandoned his search. The Night Fury brought his head to her eye level and cocked it to the side, giving her a look she couldn't figure out.

After half a minute of this, the dragon moved. It rose higher and sat back, balancing on its tail, which was bent at what she thought must have been a painful angle, but obviously wasn't, else the dragon wouldn't do it. Sitting back like this, the dragon was nearly twice her height.

She saw the beast's eyes roll back into his head. His throat let out choking noises and his head moved back and forth, as if it was trying to spit something out.

Elsa yelped loudly when something plopped with a loud 'splat' on the ground in front of her. The dragon was looking at her, and she thought it looked satisfied, if expectant. She looked to see what the dragon had spat.

It was fish. Or at least, part of a fish. The head of a haddock along with small part of its body, half-eaten and covered in slime and other things Elsa really didn't want to know about.

"Oh gods." Anna exclaimed, disgusted. Elsa's face had turned slightly green at the sight of the fish and she could feel her lunch making

the trip up her throat.

She moved from her place at the edge of the bed, making a run for the doors, Anna hot on her heels. They threw the right part of the door open and burst out, closing it behind them.

Elsa leaned against the wall, taking deep breaths and holding a hand up to her mouth, trying to stop herself from getting violently sick.

"That was absolutely disgusting." Anna said.

Elsa would have agreed, if she wasn't sure that, instead of words, her lunch would have come out.

Dragons were weird.

~E~

5. Hiccup 2

**Note: **Yes, I realize that it is the 1st of April. No, there is nothing about this chapter that is a joke.

~HE~

A Chance Encounter Chapter 5

~HE~

The moment Hiccup felt himself wake on the morning of his second day in Arendelle, he surged to a sitting position and produced his dagger in his left hand, studying his strange surroundings in alarm. It took him a minute to stop breathing heavily and for all the memories of the previous three days to return. When they did, he groaned and fell back onto the impossibly soft mattress. He closed his eyes again and debated falling back to sleep. He could hear Toothless' light snoring nearby, so the dragon was still sleeping.

Unfortunately, he did not get to decide if he would fall into deep slumber again, because the sound that had originally woken him repeated itself. Two soft knocks at the door to his quarters.

"Lord Haddock?" The soft voice of Ernie floated inside the room. Hiccup didn't open his eyes, analyzing his chances of evasion if he played dead.

Ernie repeated the knock and the call.

"It's _Hiccup_!" The viking hollered, too sleepy to be mindful of proper protocol and too angry with Ernie for waking him. He stubbornly kept his eyes closed.

"Can I come in, Hiccup?" Ernie asked. Hiccup groaned, which apparently meant 'Yes' to Ernie. The door opened lightly and the young servant stepped inside. Hiccup turned on his side, away from the door.

"Hiccup, don't you want to attend breakfast with the Queen and the

Princess? It's almost eight in the morning."

The gears inside Hiccup's mind slowly started to turn, grease and rust falling slowly.

"Breakfast ... with the ... Queen?" He repeated slowly, processing it. Suddenly, his eyes snapped open and a look of horror crossed his features. He shot up to a sitting position. "Breakfast with the Queen!" He yelled. "By Thor, I completely forgot!"

He threw the covers off of himself and rose to his feet, clad only in his underpants. He had no trouble hopping towards the bathroom to wash himself. He remembered that he washed last night, but did not trust the thoroughness of his bath at his sorry state of tiredness.

If Ernie was bothered by the various scars that adorned Hiccup's body, he showed no sign of it.

"Why didn't you wake me earlier?" He called from inside the bathroom to Ernie, who was waiting outside the door with a clean set of clothes.

"I tried around seven and nearly got stabbed for my troubles." Ernie said, conversationally, causing Hiccup to blanch. His habit of sleeping with his dagger had saved his life on exactly two occasions, but accidents such as this were just as likely.

"Sorry." He said sheepishly.

"Quite alright. It's not the worst reaction I've had from someone I had to rouse."

"For that matter, why aren't you knackered? What time did we return last night?"

"It must have been around three, I think. I didn't exactly keep count. You will learn how exactly I am this awake when we reach the breakfast table. It will be waiting for you there."

Hiccup had finished with his hurried washing, and hobbled to the door, where he received the clothes from Ernie. It was a set similar to the one he'd worn yesterday, only light blue instead of green. Clothes on, he returned to the main room, where he located his prosthetic and set about wearing it. As he tied the various straps around his stump, his mind replayed the previous day.

He'd been so elated at finding a smithy just as equipped, if not more so, than the one in Berk that he'd thrown himself into the work with gusto the likes of which he hadn't shown in years. A sudden memory caused him to grimace once again.

"Gods, I was so horrible." He mumbled. The Queen and her sister had come to find him the previous day and he'd completely blown them off. He'd refused an official invitation to a state dinner, his first in this kingdom he was visiting, and then proceeded to send them to reign in his wayward dragon. A dragon which, in hindsight, they had no reason to trust and not simply kill for stepping out of his assigned quarters.

Granted, the repairs needed to be done. Yes, he couldn't stop the process once he'd began without wasting massive amounts of time and metal and yes; nobody had told him in advance that there was going to be a dinner that he was invited to, so he couldn't be blamed for being occupied.

That still left him being a terrible guest and blowing off his hostess, who also happened to be the Queen, and her sister who had just seen him for the first time. He also endangered Toothless' life and, by extension, the life of anyone the castle guards might have sent against him.

Sometimes he hated how engrossed he became in his work. But after such cases, he sees the results of his works and is mollified.

"How do I convince them I'm not a complete brute, Ernie?" Hiccup asked, running his palm through his face. Peeking between his fingers, he saw the young man's light smirk.

"Do not worry, sir. I'm sure they'll understand. Just to be sure, however, be certain to be extra nice today."

Hiccup nodded at the wise advice. "Yeah, I'll try to do that. Gods, you should have stopped me from speaking yesterday. Tackled me, thrown me a hammer, something."

"I don't think even the Queen's ice magic could've stopped you when you were working in that smithy, sir." Ernie replied with a smile. Hiccup scowled again.

"Cut that 'sir' business, we've been over this. I'm Hiccup."

"I understand Hiccup, but we'll have to keep protocol in front of other dignitaries. It's too late for the Queen and her sister, but keep that in mind for when there are more people around."

Hiccup conceded that the people of Arendelle were much fonder of the formalities than the Berkians. He would play along. He was a guest, he didn't get to dictate terms of conduct.

"Very well. Let's go eat something, I'm starving."

He glanced at Toothless, but the dragon was fast asleep and if experience had taught him anything, it was that after a day like the previous he'd be out for a few more hours.

"I should think so, considering the only thing you've eaten is half of the food I brought you yesterday evening."

Hiccup waved a hand as he rose and headed for the door. "I eat light when I work, if at all. Could you arrange for some food to be brought up to Toothless? Not fish this time, let's not over indulge him. Actually ... never mind. Go crazy with the fish, yeah? Just tell them to leave it on the floor and close the door behind them."

Ernie nodded. "Sure. I'll do it myself while you're taking breakfast."

"You're the best, Ernie."

He stepped outside the door and began marching with determined strides, when he suddenly halted, turning back to look at the smiling Ernie.

"You should probably lead ... considering I don't know where we're going and all." Hiccup said, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment. Ernie shook his head, before walking away in the opposite direction. Hiccup rushed to catch up to him, falling in step to his left side.

They walked in silence, Ernie navigating them through the maze that was the castle. Hiccup was used to Berk's houses that, while wide, were nowhere near this big, so he was feeling quite overcome as he gazed around. People they would pass on the halls, be they servant or well-dressed visiting noble, would bow slightly to him and offer morning wishes, and he responded in kind.

All Hiccup really gathered was that they had gone down a few floors and moved westward. The halls here were different, the decoration more scarce but no less tasteful. They reached a set of wooden doors, in front of which Ernie stopped, Hiccup doing the same.

Ernie motioned for him to wait, before opening the door and stepping side.

"Announcing his majesty, Chief Hiccup Haddock."

Hiccup's cheeks reddened slightly, but he recognized his cue and stepped inside.

"Was that really necessary?" He whispered furiously to Ernie, frowning.

Ernie only smiled at him, prompting Hiccup to study the room he had stepped into. It was not particularly big, enough to fit a large table in the middle with chairs around it and some wooden stoves at the walls. Two more doors lead outside of the room. Already seated on the table were the Queen and the Princess, wearing matching dresses in hues of blue. It seemed like it was a theme.

The bountiful table in front of them was untouched, so he couldn't be that late. He did a mental double-take when he inspected the table's contents, not recognizing half the stuff.

"Queen Elsa, Princess Anna, good morning." He said, bowing his head respectfully. He was graced with twin smiles. Ernie vacated the room, closing the door as he left.

"Good morning, chief Hiccup." Elsa said, soon parroted by her sister.

"I have to apologize if I am late. I meant no offense by it." Hiccup said as he moved to occupy the last remaining chair around the square table. He sat next to the queen, with the princess on the left and smaller side of the table.

"A few minutes only, chief Hiccup." Anna waved away his concerns. "Nothing to worry about. Ernie informed us of your time of arrival yesterday. Your fatigue is understandable."

"Speaking of yesterday," Hiccup began, unsure how exactly to apologize but knowing he had to. "I realized how rude I was to my hostess and her sister. You must forgive me. I can get very excited when I work and don't often think very clearly. I apologize for my conduct."

Hiccup saw the royal sisters share a look. The princess smiled and the queen merely rolled her eyes at her. Turning back to him, queen Elsa addressed him.

"Please do not worry about it. It was partly our fault for not thinking to inform you before you'd started. I can certainly understand getting caught up in your work. Though a lot of people were disappointed at the dinner, many were waiting to get to know you."

Hiccup shifted in his seat. His stomach was growling, but the women had not started yet. Even though he didn't know the protocols of this place, he was not stupid. He could not start before them.

"I also understood the folly of sending untrained people to handle Toothless. I am certain he would not harm anyone, but it raises tension unnecessarily."

"We fed him ourselves." The princess informed him cheerily. Hiccup returned her smile, sensing her genuine enthusiasm. The princess didn't seem to share the queen's distaste of dragons. Or at the very least, she was willing to be persuaded.

"He didn't give you any trouble, did he?"

"Actually—" the princess began to say, but stopped speaking at her sister's warning look. After glaring at her sister, the queen turned to look at him.

"No, there were no issues. Toothless was friendly." Hiccup didn't buy it or a second, but let it go. Whatever it was, it couldn't be anything really damaging, considering no one had been hurt and the queen hadn't descended on him in an icy fury. If she didn't want to speak of it, he wouldn't press.

He nodded. "That's good to hear."

"Sometimes we get more people," the queen said as she waved her hand around, gesturing at the room "but usually it's just me and my sister."

Hiccup almost blurted an apology for intruding, but then remembered that he had been invited here and held his tongue.

"I appreciate the invitation. Hopefully it won't be the last time." He said, instead. By the smiles he received, it must have been a decent response.

"Let us begin, shall we? You must be quite hungry." The princess urged, and that was all the encouragement the three needed, reaching for the food in front of them. Feeling somewhat lost, Hiccup moved very slowly and mirrored the movements of the two royals. He took a large piece of bread, placed some fried eggs on his plate as well as a helping of beans. He let the sweet jam for later.

"Orange juice, chief Hiccup?" Elsa offered, holding a glass canteen of orange liquid.

"Yes, thank you." Hiccup agreed and the queen filled his glass with it. Hiccup tried it slowly. Slightly bitter, but also sweet. It was very good. He set about eating his food, being very careful about reminding himself not to use his hands for anything but the bread. He saw the metallic spoons and was impressed. Vikings used spoons, too, but rarely, and theirs were wooden, too.

"Is something wrong, chief Hiccup?" The princess asked him after they ate for some time, probably noticing some of his hesitation in touching this or that on the table.

"Apologies, I'm simply admiring the plenty on the table. I don't recognize half of these." He said, carefully cutting a piece of some kind of pie and placing it on his plate.

The princess grinned at him. "The cooks spoil us. Ever since we were little girls, they've been trying to fatten us up."

Hiccup exerted all his self-control to keep himself from making a joke, while looking at the queen. She saw his expression; and his smile must have betrayed some of his inner battle, for she raised an eyebrow at him, as if daring him to say something.

Far be it from him to avoid a challenge.

He noticed the queen's plate. It had a piece of pie, along with something that, as far as Hiccup could tell, was baked bread with some kind of stuffing inside.

"You're going to eat that?" He asked nonchalantly, after swallowing a mouthful. The queen narrowed her eyes at him slightly. When she spoke, she did so slowly, challenge positively dripping from her tone.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

How was he to hold back, when faced with this?

"Nothing, nothing." He said lightly, turning to look at his plate. "In fact, I admire people comfortable with their weight."

He didn't look to see what he was sure must have been a scandalized expression on the queen's face, but the unhidden snickers from the princess were enough reward for his efforts. He returned to his food with barely hidden satisfaction.

What he didn't expect, was to get mocked right back.

"Perhaps you should have some of what I'm having. You look like you need it." The queen's voice bore into him like an arrow and he choked on the piece of pie he was currently swallowing. He did his best to keep his food from rising while keeping his laughter contained. The princess had no such problems, and her melodious laughter echoed over the breakfast table.

Once Hiccup had managed to swallow, face red, he turned to look at

the queen. She was smirking at him in satisfaction and humor, and he knew he'd just been paid back for the bread stunt, on the way to Arendelle. Two for one.

_ 'Well played, Queen Elsa.' _ He thought, smiling back at her.

The mood was decidedly lighter after that, and the irony of the ice being broken wasn't lost on Hiccup.

"What is this?" Hiccup asked curiously, inspecting a nearly black liquid inside a warm pot.

"Try some." The queen suggested. "It helps one wake up and retain concentration."

Hiccup poured some as instructed, smelled the liquid, and carefully tried some, mindful of its hot state. He grimaced once he swallowed the bitter fluid.

"It's an acquired taste, and it does help." The queen shrugged, seeing his grimace.

Once all three had had their fill, Hiccup was addressed by Anna.

"Did you mean it, chief Hiccup, about the food?"

Hiccup nodded. "Yes. Meals in Berk, unless it is a special occasion, hold much less variety. Not to mention that I'm pretty sure that a lot of what I just ate doesn't exist that far north."

"Where is Berk, if you don't mind me asking." Queen Elsa asked. "I know of the general area of the Viking provinces, but did not know about Berk specifically."

Hiccup looked up at the ceiling, not really seeing it, and smiled.

"Heh. My mother used to say that Berk was situated twelve days north of hopeless, a few degrees south of freezing to death, and solidly on the meridian of misery."

Hiccup allowed his voice to fade as he was memories of his mother flowed through him. Like she had been, memories of her were gentle and happy. He shook his head slightly, losing the wistful smile and looking at the royal sisters. Anna's smile at him was clearly fond, but the queen's expression was inscrutable. No matter.

"Just to be it clear," Hiccup said "There is no such place called Hopeless or Freezing-To-Death. It's a figure of speech."

The queen looked at him oddly. "We're not stupid, chief Hiccup. We can tell a figure of speech when we hear one."

"Mah, just checking. You'd be surprised how many people think they are actual places when they hear this."

Both women looked at him in disbelief.

"Seriously?" The princess asked. "If it were any more obvious it'd

poke people in the eye."

Hiccup shrugged. "I've learned not to underestimate human stupidity." He paused to drink a glass of water. "In any case, I'd need maps to navigate you from here to Berk with any degree of confidence, especially since I still don't know where 'here' is. Plus, I'm used to thinking of distances in flying terms, so I don't trust myself in measuring them with mundane means without the aid of maps or navigational instruments."

"We'll take care of that later, in the map room." The queen said with certainty.

"I have to admit," the princess interjected "the idea of flying fascinates me. What is it like?"

Hiccup beamed at her, a smile splitting his features. "It's the best feeling you can imagine, magnified by about six times."

The queen raised that maddeningly perfect eyebrow again. "Six? Why not five, or maybe ten?"

"I have a friend who's fond of statistics. He came up with the number six."

"What's the best thing about riding a dragon, then?" The princess asked him, wistful. Hiccup furrowed his brow, thinking about the question harder than he probably should. What was it he enjoyed the most? He couldn't say Toothless' company, because that didn't necessitate flying, exactly.

"The view." Hiccup finally decided, nodding his head at himself. "Definitely the view. Imagine the view from the tallest tower in the castle, and then imagine being ten times higher than that, while being able to move anywhere and look at things from every angle you can think of. You won't truly understand what I speak of until you see it for yourselves."

The princess was hanging from his every word, her eyes far away, but it was the queen's expression that caught his eye. She was considering his words and frowning, ever so slightly.

"And what is worst thing about it, then?" She asked. Her tone was not challenging, Hiccup could tell she was genuinely curious, trying to look at the matter from all angles. Her question drew a frown from him, and he gave it the necessary thought before deciding on an answer.

"The smell." He said quietly, lacking his earlier exuberance.

"The smell?" Princess Anna asked, laughing lightly. "I can see where you're coming from. We often visit the stables, so, we can emphasize."

Hiccup shook his head. "That's not the kind of smell I'm talking about."

After half a minute of his silence, he was prodded out of his thoughts by the queen's gentle: "Then?"

He turned his upper body to look her in the eye, not wanting to miss a single detail of her reaction to his words.

"It's the smell of burning flesh. There is no worse smell, no smell more disgusting. It stains your clothes for days, and the area for even longer. It is revolting."

He watched their reactions with mixed feelings. The princess appeared to be forming a mental image and looked slightly queasy. The queen had paled, but he could see thoughts flying a mile a minute behind her eyes. What was she thinking, what was she considering? What conclusions did she draw about him?

"Apologies for bringing such talk to the breakfast table queen Elsa, princess Anna."

"You merely answered a question truthfully, we cannot fault you for that. We are done with breakfast, in any case." The blond replied, the calculating look still present in her face.

Hiccup tipped his head respectfully. None of them had had a bite in a good few minutes, but nor did they make any move to get up. He recognized that soon they would have to part for the day, but there was another matter that he wanted to address before such a time.

"There is something else I wanted to say." Hiccup began after he had gathered his thoughts, changing the subject.

At the queen's encouraging nod, he continued. "I know that it's been many years now, that you've heard it hundreds of times already and that it probably won't mean much to you coming from a stranger, but I wanted to offer my sincere condolences for the loss of your parents."

Hiccup saw both women be visibly taken aback by this and repressed the urge to flinch, not knowing if he'd overstepped his boundaries.

"I admit that I was curious about your status as queen considering your young age, and the fate of your parents was written in the history book you gave me. Apologies if I touched a sore subject." He finally got control of himself and stopped his rambling, hoping that he hadn't made things worse.

The sisters shared another one of those looks, the kind that he recognized from himself and Toothless but could not hope to translate on another pair, just like his looks with Toothless were understood by none other.

"Your condolences are graciously accepted, chief Hiccup." The princess told him gently. He held himself back from audibly letting out the breath he was holding, but he was flooded with relief, nonetheless.

"It is true that we have heard this a lot over the years," the queen continued "and that it can get irritating when it comes from certain people."

Princess Anna picked up her sister's train of thought. "People who

have never experienced loss, and thus could not hope to understand us, but nevertheless tried to appear sorrowful to earn favor."

"But such is not the case with you, is it, chief Hiccup?" The Queen asked. Hiccup had had enough training with the Thorston twins over the years to avoid whipping his head back and forth when they did the whole siblings-completing-each-other's-sentences thing, thankfully.

"After all," the princess continued with a small, sad smile. "You can't be much older than Elsa, yet you are chief of your own tribe."

Hiccup supposed that their logic was sound.

"It is true." He confirmed. "My mother died early in my childhood. My father ... my father's death was more recent, but still a good few years back. They are both in Valhalla, now."

"You have our sincere condolences, chief Hiccup." The princess said. Hiccup did not fail to notice that she was clutching her sister's hand under the table. For whose sake, he did not know.

"Our parents were lost at sea, as you must know from the history book." The eldest sister said. "What happened to yours?" She paled momentarily, before hastily adding "Of course, we understand if it's not something you wish to share. We do not want to intrude."

Hiccup was well aware that it was hypocritical of him to withhold all information regarding the matter, but knew equally well that he could not reveal majority of what happened, for reasons of his tribe's security. Showing Toothless was big enough, he did not need to advertise that his tribe controlled more than one dragon.

"My mother was killed during a raid when I was six." He said eventually. He could not reveal the nature of the raid, but assumed that the royal sisters would draw their own conclusions as to their attackers. From the sympathetic looks he received, they must have.

"My father passed away in the heat of battle, during the war leading to my ascension to the chieftainship." He said, again deliberately revealing as little as he could. He could feel the old despair rise up again, and he squashed it like an insect the moment it reared its ugly head. He needed to be in control right now, not wallow in guilt and sorrow. He'd already done that years ago and it hadn't helped him any.

"We're sorry." The princess said quietly. Hiccup shook his head at her.

"My father perished in battle, but do not doubt that it was a death worthy of a great warrior. Sometimes, when we're feeling particularly happy, those who knew my father and I like to think that he died ... happy."

The tense silence was broken by the queen. "Why?" She breathed out. Hiccup smiled wanly.

"Because by doing so, he saved me."

He noticed the eyes of the two women focused on his cheek and realized that he was unconsciously tracing the long scar on his face. He stopped the movement immediately and straightened his posture. He'd revealed much; too much. Nothing that could compromise Berk, but he'd still opened up to two people who were not only strangers, but also royals of a foreign kingdom. Who knew what of the things he said could be perceived as a weakness, a threat, or anything in between. He cursed his need for drama. Why couldn't he reign his tongue in for once? What kind of chief talked like this on the very first day of his stay abroad?

"We're sorry." The phrase was repeated, this time by the queen. Hiccup looked at her, carefully, but saw nothing but compassion in her eyes. He didn't let it fully convince him. He'd been duped before, and was far from completely confident in his ability to read people.

"Thank you."

"It must have been very hard." The princess said. Looking at her, Hiccup felt relatively certain that compassion in her eyes held no traces of deceit. The princess seemed like an open book, with only kindness and understanding written on its pages.

"It was." He agreed. "But this is Berk. Vikings understand loss very early on." Or become losses themselves, he mentally added.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He had to get out of there. He had to stop speaking.

The queen must have noticed his discomfort, because she offered him an out. She pushed her chair back and rose regally.

"Thank you for attending breakfast with us, chief Hiccup. We extend to you the same invitation for tomorrow. Enie should inform you of the times for lunch and dinner. However, do not feel obligated to attend. We would be glad to have you, but you are free to move about the city as you wish and eat at your own pace. If there is something more formal that we would particularly want you present in, you will be informed well in advance." She added the last bit with a sheepish smile. Obviously, he wasn't the only one who felt embarrassed with last night's events.

He offered the queen a grateful smile as he rose.

"Many thanks. I have enjoyed your company, and shall endeavor to do the same tomorrow."

"What are your plans for the rest of the day, chief Haddock?" The princess asked him.

"I'm going to wake up the lizard, first, and then I was hoping to nag Ernie into giving me a complete tour of the castle, actually. I figured I'll have found some interesting things to see or do after that."

The Queen nodded at him. "That is a great idea. I would have loved to accompany you, but time does not permit."

Hiccup smiled. "I understand, queen Elsa, trust me." He was slightly surprised to receive a smile in response, but accepted it nonetheless.

The three of them moved towards the exit of the room as servants surged in from the side doors to clear the table. Outside, Ernie was already waiting, hands clasped behind his back.

"My Queen, Princess." He bowed to the two women, who nodded at him.

"I hope you enjoy your tour of the castle, chief Hiccup." The queen said. "Perhaps our paths will cross."

"See you, chief Haddock!" Princess Anna waved cheerfully as she and her sister move away. Hiccup waved back, before turning to Ernie.

The young servant raised an eyebrow. Maybe the queen was running a class, somewhere.

"How did it go?"

Hiccup did his best to look offended.

"Why do you think it went anything other than perfectly?"

The eyebrow grew more intense, and Hiccup, with his senses for such things finely honed by the experiences of his childhood, had the sudden feeling that he was being mocked, albeit in good nature.

"Oy! No comments are allowed from tour guides, thank you very much."

"Is a tour the plan for today, then?" Ernie asked. His tone was neutral, but Hiccup could read the young man's mocking in his eyes and shook his head.

"Yes, so get useful, eh? I'm not paying you to do nothing!"

Ernie started walking down the corridor, Hiccup next to him.

"You do realize you're not the one paying me, right?"

"Back-talking isn't allowed, either. Onwards!"

~H~

To Hiccup's consternation, touring the castle was easier said than done.

They walked the way back to Hiccup's rooms, and this time the viking paid attention on the path. When they reached the doors, he was relatively certain that he'd be able to find his way again.

They found the Night Fury gulping down the last of a group of fish, free of his harness and mechanical tailfin. It took the dragon a few seconds to come out of post-feeding contended bliss, but when he noticed Hiccup he bounded towards him, crooning happily.

"Hey bud, I love you too." Hiccup chuckled as the dragon nuzzled his snout on his chest, while he caressed the onyx creature's head with his hands.

It took a good minute for Toothless to open his eyes, stop purring, and observe that they were not alone in the room. He turned his head, taking in Ernie with eyes wide, full of curiosity. His ear flaps were upright and twitching, a sure sign of the beast's interest and good mood.

"This is Ernie. You met yesterday." The brief glance from Toothless confirmed that the dragon had heard him. To his credit, Ernie did not waver under the dragon's inquisitive stare.

"He's the one who brought you the fish." Hiccup added, just to be sure. Toothless' right ear twitched. He started moving forward, approaching Ernie.

Ernie did not bat an eyelash as the black dragon sniffed around him, obviously finding the scent of fish and confirming Hiccup's words. Toothless tried to reach inside Ernie's uniform, convinced that there must be more food there.

"He doesn't have fish on him, Toothless. Lay off him."

The dragon's gaze flickered between Hiccup and Ernie, eyes slightly closed and ears nearly flattened. Hiccup recognized the dragon's exasperation, though he doubted Ernie could decipher his facial expressions quite yet.

"We're going to be seeing a lot of him, Toothless. Ernie is a good guy and he wants to be your friend."

On his words, Toothless went back to inspecting the servant boy. Ernie met the dragon's stare, and allowed his face to smile encouragingly.

Hiccup was amused to note that Toothless was about to regurgitate another fish. He'd still not managed to make him understand that humans did not value raw fish as much as dragons did. Nevertheless, it was a move Toothless always made when he wanted to extend a claw of friendship, so to speak. Sharing his food was the best opening a dragon knew, and had tremendous meaning between dragons.

He'd been hoping for this to happen when he told Ernie to bring fish, but was not sure that Toothless would open up so soon.

True to form, Toothless sat on his tail to make the regurgitation easier, and after hacking for a few seconds spat the tail end of a fish that Hiccup couldn't really recognize.

Ernie's expression finally lost its carefully controlled visage, and the young man looked at Hiccup in confusion and a silent plea for help. Toothless stared at Ernie patiently, as if waiting for a particularly dim child to pick up the piece of bread set in front of him and start eating.

Very carefully, Hiccup mimed taking the fish in his hands and taking a hearty bite out of it, making sure to include chewing and swallowing. Ernie went slightly green, but understood the severity of

the next few moment.

"Thank you, Toothless." He said, and Hiccup was impressed to note that his voice wavered only a little bit.

The servant reached for the fish, visibly repressing a grimace at the slimy surface, and brought the carcass up to his mouth. After a moment's hesitation, he bit down on the flesh of the fish and cut off a piece, chewing it carefully on his mouth before gulping it down. Hiccup was certain that he had not kept his face as clear as Ernie did, when he'd been presented with the same situation. The citizens of Arendelle sure knew how to stay stoic.

Toothless seemed satisfied if the curve of his lips and the firmness of his ear flaps was any indication, and he received the proffered remains of the fish from Ernie with no complain, gulping them down once again within seconds.

After he did this, he approached his head to Ernie again. This time he didn't sniff him, only stared into his eyes, bringing his head halfway between them. Hiccup saw Ernie glance at him with uncertainty again, prompting the viking chief to nod at him encouragingly.

Ernie reached his hand, tentatively at first, and touched the Night Fury. Toothless wiggled his head a little, and Ernie took the hint, caressing the smooth scales. To his surprise, the dragon let out a low purring sound from deep inside his throat.

"That went well." Hiccup said, clapping his hands with a smile. Ernie looked apprehensively at him, though he didn't stop patting and caressing Toothless.

"Was there doubt of this?" He asked. Hiccup repressed a grin, these people were just too easy to tease.

"Well, either this or he would have taken your hands, because they smell the most like fish."

Ernie tore his hand away from Toothless and backed away, his back hitting the door. Toothless opened his eyes and stared confusedly at him, not understanding why he stopped. Upon hearing Hiccup's snickers, the dragon turned to him and uttered a questioning warble.

Ernie looked at him and noticed his almost silent laughter, before his eyes narrowed.

"There was never any danger, was there?" He asked, though his tone was resigned, as if he already knew the answer and was just confirming his theory.

"No, there wasn't. Even if Toothless didn't like you, he wouldn't attack you." Hiccup explained as Ernie straightened his posture and smoothed out his uniform. When Toothless trotted the space between them and pushed his snout in his hand, Ernie didn't protest, instead going back to rubbing the Night Fury.

"I suppose I'll have to get used to your particular brand of humor, my Lord."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes. "Unless you want to receive personal and intensive lessons on the nastier side of my humor, I suggest no more slip-ups on calling me Hiccup when we are alone."

"Apologies, Hiccup."

"Good, good!" The viking said, in complete contrast to his quiet, threatening tone of a few seconds earlier. "Now, if Toothless has had enough petting, let's go see what this castle has to offer, shall we?"

"Right." Ernie nodded at him. He turned his head to look at the dragon, who, in turn, was looking at him, curiosity evident in his eyes.

"Toothless?" Ernie asked, to Hiccup's great surprise. The way the Night Fury's eyes zeroed in on his own must have given him all the reply he needed, for he continued. "Do you want to go outside with Hiccup and I? I will show the two of you the rest of the castle. Do you want to see the castle?"

Hiccup had to fight to suppress his grin. Ernie was turning out much better than he'd dared hope.

As a reply, the dragon trotted back to Hiccup, got behind him, and started pushing the viking chief towards the door with his head.

"Oy, quit it. The tour was my idea, you don't have to convince me." He said, bemused. Ignoring his protests, Toothless pushed him all the way to the door, which Ernie had helpfully opened, and then beyond it, into the hallway outside.

Finally free, Hiccup snorted and straightened his tunic, the Night Fury practically bouncing around them in his excitement. He could understand Toothless' hurry to get out of the room. He had slept through most of yesterday, resting from the long journey. Now he was recovered, and could not take being stuffed inside a room for long hours.

"This way, I believe." Ernie instructed, and they began walking, Toothless on Hiccup's right side, tailing swishing behind him.

"Where are we headed?"

"I think the Gardens are a good first destination. Lots of space for Toothless to move, and the Gardens themselves are very impressive." Hiccup nodded his agreement.

They went down a few floors down, and out a big door, though smaller than the gate leading to the Courtyard.

Porches hugged the length of the walls, covered by wooden roofs painted light blue. A few equally wooden steps and they were on the beginnings of the Gardens.

Cobbled paths led deeper into the Gardens, separated by hedges tall and short, which divided the open area into sections, each filled with magnificent specimens of flora, ranging from small fields of

flowers with all the colors of the rainbow, to tall tress carefully trimmed and brimming with life and energy. Soft notes of birds reverberated around the garden, completing the serene and peaceful environment. A few servants had been working on this hedge or the other, and were now looking at the three of them with half-hidden curiosity.

"Toothless, please stay on the cobbled path, otherwise your paws will dig up the ground and the gardeners won't be happy." Toothless regarded Ernie with wide eyes, before turning his gaze downwards, to the path of stone that they were currently walking on. Grumbling, he scooted closer to the center, heeding Ernie's words. The servant smiled, satisfied.

They walked slowly through the gardens and Ernie took the time to explain to Hiccup what this or that flower or brush was. The servant sadly could not provide all the details Hiccup would have liked, and he did not really want to bother any of the gardeners yet. Toothless meandered along with them, not nearly as impressed as Hiccup was. He took particular interest in a pair of butterflies, watching them intently and following their erratic flight pattern with his gaze.

The path through the gardens led them around the second layer of the castle walls, almost a complete circle around it. By the time they finished, many more people were also taking strolls over the gardens. Servants moved purposefully and guests or visitors strolled slowly, enjoying the beautiful day in the gardens.

Hiccup did not fail to note the looks he and Toothless received. They ranged from the outwardly frightful, with an elderly woman gasping upon sighting Toothless and fainting on the spot, to the openly interested and the secretly assessing. From well-dressed nobles watching Toothless with wonder and hints of fear, to gaggles of young women trying and failing to be discreet as they assessed the viking chief.

Doubtlessly, everyone knew of his arrival, what with his very public entrance into the city. Perhaps his enclosure in the smithy for a full day had also spread, and his absence from the feast yesterday must have been felt. What impression did that make?

Hiccup knew that he was not behaving as he probably should. He'd gone on diplomatic missions before, and they'd all gone without a hitch. Attacking a queen, spurning her invitations, and scaring her subjects did not a good diplomat make. He was certain that if he'd planned this visit and prepared for it, it would have played out a lot more differently.

But he hadn't, and it was too late now. He was a guest at Arendelle and though he was the chief of Berk, he was hardly there in his official capacity. Little more than a tourist, really. So he could be excused if he didn't play the political game and instead indulged in his curiosity, right?

Hiccup snorted. Perhaps if he kept thinking that, he'd eventually believe it.

The entered back into the castle, leaving the beautiful gardens behind.

Through the hallways Ernie led them, and from them into the biggest rooms. The ballroom; nearly cavernous in size, with sleek marble floors and beautiful decorations, though it was deserted currently.

The clock tower, with life-sized human figures and one of the biggest, most elaborate mechanical creations Hiccup had ever seen. After ten minutes of study and three foiled disassembly attempts, Ernie insisted that they move on, much to the viking's consternation.

He showed them the Portrait Room, a very carefully spaced room with the walls lined with beautiful art pieces and comfortable-looking couches.

>Up and down floors they went. From the Portrait Room on the ground floor to a grand balcony, four floors up, that gazes out beyond the walls and over the city. Then down and outside again, to the royal stables, where majestic horses slept and ate, tended by the servants. Toothless did not approach, but Hiccup indulged his curiosity and pestered the servants with questions about the care of the animals.<p>

After the stables, Ernie insisted that they go for lunch. Hiccup politely refused to attend a public feast, citing that he wasn't ready yet, nor dressed for it. Ernie accepted and led him and Toothless to what Hiccup recognized was the same room he'd had breakfast, earlier. He was brought much more than he could possibly eat, while Toothless ate half a doe with gusto.

By now Hiccup was beginning to understand how the castle is navigated, but Ernie led them to parts of the castle that he hadn't been before, thus eliminating his progress.

He was brought into the Library. It was a cozy but spacious room, with a fireplace and couches for comfortable reading, and four lines of sizable bookcases.

Something didn't fit right.

"Ernie," Hiccup called, receiving a look from the young man who was watching Toothless like a hawk while the dragon was smelling some books. When he had the servant's attention, he continued. "The wall here is fake, isn't it? The next room in this hallways doesn't start for a good distance yet. I'd say the Library should be twice as big as it is. What's going on?"

"It's not exactly a state secret, but beyond this wall is the royal library. No one is allowed in there but the queen, the princess, the council and the servant in charge of it. Hidden like this, it doesn't present temptation for people who aren't allowed."

Hiccup understood the meaningful look, and raised his hands in a placating gesture.

"I didn't say I wanted in. If it's not allowed then it's not allowed. I was just curious."

"Of course." Ernie said, voice carefully laced with sarcasm. Hiccup resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

They left the Library after that.

"Say, Ernie, can you arrange a meeting between me and madam Gertrude?"

Ernie looked at him, surprised. "The overseer?" Hiccup nodded.

"She seemed like an interesting and down to earth person."

"I will tell Madam Gertrude that you've asked after her."

"Thank you."

They didn't say anything else, because they were suddenly not alone in the hallway. On the opposite side, two men were walking briskly, coming their way.

Hiccup recognized the bald man as the general. What was his name? Mertok? The other person, he did not recognize. Unlike the crisp suits of Arendelle, this man wore a white tunic from neck to feet. He wore something on his head that Hiccup had not seen before, a weird cross between a hat and a turban. His skin was slightly darker, but not overly so. He was younger than the general, but still much older than Hiccup, dark eyes inspecting him and Toothless with open interest.

The two men came to a stop in front of the three of them, and it was only polite for them to stop, as well. Hiccup glanced quickly at Toothless and, upon noticing the dragon's mistrustful gaze, placed a calming hand on his neck.

"Chief Haddock, mister Sherner." The general greeted them, and Hiccup absently remembered that Sherner was Ernie's last name.

"Mister ... Mertok, was it?" Hiccup asked and received a nod from the aging man.

"I am Shad Mertok, Commander General of her majesty's armed forces. This here," he waved at the man next to him, who bowed politely "is Marn Gestar, the Grandlandian ambassador." Hiccup had no idea where Grandland was, or how important it was, but strove to make no show of either.

Gestar bowed again, before speaking. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Chief Haddock."

Hiccup did not correct their use of his title. He felt no inclination to do so. "Likewise, master Gestar."

"It is good to finally meet you. You stirred a lot of interest with your arrival. Many were hoping to meet you yesterday, me included."

"Apologies, master Gestar. I wished not offend anybody."

"No offense was taken, my Lord, none at all. And is this the dragon Toothless, then?" The Grandlandian asked, moving his gaze the the Night Fury. Hiccup's fingers tensed on Toothless' neck. He did not like the calculating look on the man's eyes. Either of them,

actually.

"Indeed."

"Magnificent beast." The general said, nodding approvingly. Hiccup rather doubted the general was speaking about Toothless' magnetic personality. The dragon himself reacted to the word beast, slightly withdrawing his lips, hinting at the razor sharp teeth underneath.

"We don't like the word beast." Hiccup said.

"Apologies." Mertok said automatically, and Hiccup again had to repress the urge to scowl. He disliked politicians. He hated having to examine each and every sentence for legitimacy before accepting it.

"It obeys your every command, does it?" The ambassador asked. This time, Hiccup allowed himself to grimace.

"Toothless is a he, and he trusts me, as I trust him."

"Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating."

"Indeed," the general cut in, returning his gaze to Hiccup. "It was an honor to make your acquaintance, Chief Haddock. I wish you the best for the rest of your stay here, and hope that we will meet again before you depart."

"Likewise, general."

"Farewell, for now, Chief Haddock." The Grandlandian said, bowing once again. Hiccup bowed his head respectfully in his direction. With one last lingering look, the two men stepped to the side and passed by Ernie, continuing their way down the hallway.

Hiccup, Ernie and Toothless turned their heads to watch them leave, the dragon growling from deep inside his throat.

"Relax, Toothless." Hiccup murmured.

"Welcome to court politics, Hiccup." Ernie said, before continuing down the corridor.

The young servant led them higher into the castle, into the residential areas. He pointed out the princess' quarters, the queen's old chambers, the abandoned quarters of the old king and queen and the staircase that lead higher still; all the way to the queen's current bedroom, her office and the roof.

Then they went downwards, Ernie intending to lead them back towards the Courtyard and from there to the lighthouse.

"What is this?" Hiccup asked, seeing a pair of half-open doors, big enough to fit even Toothless. Ernie stopped and looked where Hiccup was pointing. He diligently went and opened the doors fully, allowing entry.

The room was relatively spacious, but sported none of the decorations

of the rest of the castle. It was mostly made of dark marble, with stone benches, seats and tables along the walls, and a deep depression on the center of the room the perimeter of which was higher than the rest of the floor. Steps lead to the bottom of the hole.

"What is that?" Hiccup asked in wonderment.

"This is the Bath-house." Ernie declared gesturing around the room. Pointing to the depression on the floor, he continued. "This here is the pool. When on use, it fills with water of a controlled temperature. It is, in essence, a giant bathtub like the one in your quarters."

"Why is it empty?"

"There is nothing scheduled for today. It is not as hard to fill it as would seem, but keeping the temperature and purity of the water is quite hard. Hence, we only fill it when necessary."

"Fascinating." And it really was. Hiccup had seen so many things that he desperately wanted to study. He had vowed to visit that clock and figure it out. Now he'd have to do the same with the controlled-temperature pool.

"Quite. Ready to move on?"

"Yeah."

The returned to the part of the castle that Hiccup recognized, intending to visit the Lighthouse and the Chapel. On their way to the Courtyard, they reached a spacious room, almost full of people.

Their arrival hushed all conversation for a few seconds, before the people remembered their manners and returned to their conversation. Hiccup noted people of all shapes, sizes and dress. Peasant and nobles, Arendelle locals and what had to be foreign officials, all standing or sitting in this room. To his left a set of double bronze doors were closed, a pair of guards on each side. To his right, the doors leading to the courtyard.

"Ernie?" he asked quietly. Toothless was eyeing the people with wariness, but thankfully no hostility. Hiccup did not cease rubbing his friend's neck.

"To our left is the Great Hall, otherwise known as the Throne Room. There, Queen Elsa holds court, at the moment."

As if to prove his point, the bronze doors open and a pair of noblemen stepped out. Through the doors, Hiccup saw a grand room, lavishly decorated in deep red. On the far end from the door was a slender golden throne, elevated on a pedestal of three steps, above which the royal crest of Arendelle hung. The ice sorceress sat on the throne in a regal purple dress and the circlet of her post in her braided hair, looking every bit the Queen that she was.

The sides of room were filled with people, all dressed elegantly and obviously important in some way, shape or form. The Queen's Court.

Queen Elsa caught his eye immediately through the doors. A small smile appeared on her face, and Hiccup realized that he was staring and that his mouth was slightly open, a fact that he rectified immediately.

The Queen motioned to her left with her index, and a soldier walked up to the throne. The queen leaned forward and whispered to him, after which he nodded and headed for the bronze doors.

Hiccup had a bad feeling as soon as the guard reached the guards at the door and spoke to them. These two stopped the pair of nobles that had been walking to the doors. They sputtered, citing that it was their turn, but held their silence at the guards' insistence.

The first guard looked at their group and walked up to them, and Hiccup had to fight with himself not to groan or rub his eyes. Ernie took two steps forward, and exchanged a few quiet words with the guard who, upon received a confirmatory nod from the young man, returned inside the room.

The bronze doors closed. Hiccup blinked in confusion.

"What's going on, Ernie?"

"We have been called to present ourselves in the Queen's court. Well, you and Toothless have."

"Then why did the doors just close?"

"It is protocol for foreign royalty to be announced before the doors open to receive them."

Hiccup shook his head, leading Toothless closer to the bronze doors.

"And I suppose the chances of skipping without insulting everyone here and their grandmothers is slim to none?"

"We might make a court politician of you yet, Hiccup." Ernie said, drawing a chuckle from Hiccup.

Through the doors, the sound of his name floated, among other words that he didn't make out. He turned to Ernie, who nodded.

Hiccup straightened his posture and squared his shoulders as the two guards opened the bronze doors. Between him and the Throne was a rich red carpet. On the sides of the room were seats for the courtiers, and there was a door on each side of the opposite wall. Guards lined the walls.

Assuming he had already been announced, Hiccup walked with slow but determined steps through the length of the room. Everything done in this room was for show, and he could give shows. He kept his hand on Toothless' neck. The dragon himself had stood straighter, becoming quite a bit taller in this way, as his neck was no longer stretched forwards. His wings lay half-open, a way to make himself look bigger and more imposing. Judging by the faces of various courtiers, it had worked.

When he reached what he deemed to be a respectable distance from the

Queen -not too close, but close enough to hold an equal conversation-, he stopped. He tipped his head and the upper part of his torso respectfully.

Toothless, having long ago learned to recognize when Hiccup needed him to be quiet and still, did so now; keeping himself straight, strong, and covertly menacing.

"Queen Elsa."

"Chief Haddock. With the power vested in me, I officially welcome you to the kingdom of Arendelle."

"Much obliged. It is an honor to be here and witness Arendelle's wonders."

"We welcome and recognize you as the Chief, and therefore representative, of the Viking tribe of Berk. You are welcome to reside here for as long as you so desire."

"Again, many thanks, Queen Elsa."

"A debt owed is a debt that must be paid, Chief Haddock. Arendelle has slighted you, and this we will not forget."

"Banish such thoughts from your mind. I invoke no such debt. Let the meeting between our people be one of equals, not one of responsibility and consequences."

The small smile on the Queen's face widened imperceptibly, but Hiccup caught it, and proverbially grasped it with both hands, grinning in victory.

"A generous offer. Very well, it shall be so. I look forward to negotiations between us. I believe we have much to offer to each other."

"As you say, Queen Elsa."

"You are invited to attend Court, if you so wish. The dragon Toothless is, of course, invited as well."

"I am honored by the invitation, but today I had wished to complete my tour of your magnificent castle. Perhaps in the days to come, I will take you up on it."

"Very well. I hope we see each other soon."

"I very much think we will."

"Have a nice evening, Chief Haddock."

"And to you, Queen Elsa."

"Try to catch the sunset from the west tower. It is truly a sight to behold."

With these parting words, Hiccup bowed his head again and turned on his heel, marching with the same purposeful stride back to the bronze doors, which opened to allow him and Toothless exit. He resisted the

urge to look around at the faces of the courtiers, knowing that every set of eyes was trained on him.

Ernie was waiting for them outside. He nodded upon seeing them, and turned on his heels. Together, they all walked outside and to the courtyard, the people giving Toothless a wide berth, as he passed.

"How did it go?" Ernie asked. Hiccup glanced at him, and realized that the servant was fighting back a smile.

"What makes you think it went anything other than perfectly?"

Ernie snorted, but held his tongue. Hiccup relayed the Queen's suggestion to the young man, and Ernie agreed. He decided to combine their destination with the Queen's suggestion, since sundown was nearly upon them.

Sadly, the Lighthouse was not big enough to fit Toothless inside, and the dragon agreed to wait at the entrance. Climbing the winding stairs, the two men found themselves at the top railing, gazing out at the fjord beyond the walls.

"Look." Ernie said simply, as the sun started dipping behind the mountain and the sea, taking an orange-red hue as it did so, and painting the water with the same color.

Hiccup flew a Night Fury, and was no stranger to breathtaking sunsets. On the other hand, his vast experience with them made him all the more able to appreciate the really good ones. This fit in that category, no doubt.

They watched in silent wonder, until the sun was completely gone. Then, reluctantly, Ernie lead them back down, where they reunited with the bored dragon.

"Are you hungry, bud?" The dragon's positive crooning was all the reply either man needed.

"Time for dinner, Hiccup?"

"Yeah. Let me see if I can find the way to that mess room?"

"By all means."

It took a few minutes and two wrong turns, but Hiccup finally lead the three to the room he'd had breakfast and lunch in, grinning triumphantly when he recognized the door, Ernie following behind him diligently.

Inside, it was pretty much a repeat experience of lunch, only with different food varieties and this time parts of wild pig spread out for Toothless. Ernie ate with them at Hiccup's insistence, seating himself apprehensively on the proffered chair next to the viking.

After everyone was fed and watered, they exited the room and Hiccup started walking the path back to his quarters.

"Don't you have anything you want to do, Ernie? Following me around

all day must get pretty tiring."

"It is my duty, and it is not unpleasant."

"Nevertheless, you must need some me-time. Go on. I'll be in my quarters; probably draw something or other."

"Are you certain?" Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"Relax. You can report to the Queen that I stayed in my quarters, because that's exactly what I'll do. Staying with me any longer won't help you."

Ernie's face reddened, and he began to speak, talking hurriedly.

"Hiccup, I didn't-"

"Don't lie, Ernie, it's bad form. Of course you did. It makes sense for the Queen to want me watched, and I don't really mind. I promise I won't leave my quarters, so you can go and enjoy yourself in a tavern or whatever it is you youngsters do these days."

Ernie still looked embarrassed and a little lost, but he managed to regain some of his composure.

"Are you sure?" He asked again.

"Yes, I am. Go. We'll see each other again tomorrow, yeah?"

"As you say, Hiccup."

Ernie left them at the door to their quarters, bowed deeply, and walked away.

Hiccup let Toothless inside the room, closed the door and undressed, intending to take a bath. He took his time, relaxing in the warm water and experimenting with the different soaps and creams. He slipped when he got out, but managed to hold onto the basin and thus not break anything, for which he thanked Odin endlessly.

He found the Night Fury scratching the door to the balcony. He clicked it open, allowing Toothless to walk outside and curl around himself on the balcony floor. He rose his head to the sky and crooned sadly.

"I'm sorry we didn't fly today, bud. I'll try to arrange something for tomorrow. It's more complicated than you think."

Toothless dismissed him with a warbling sound and a shove of his tail. Hiccup left him to his moping. He'd come around eventually. He noted his original clothes and armor, perfectly clean, folded and placed at the foot of his bed near his bags.

He sat himself on his desk after taking his notebook in hand. He scribbled some of his thoughts on it, blessedly using ink. An hour later, he began working on his sketch of the castle again, now better able to put details, having seen it up close.

Eventually sleepiness overtook him. After a massive yawn worthy of

any dragon, he undressed in order to go to bed. Outside, it was completely dark and he could only barely make out Toothless' sleeping form. He took the time to unlatch his prosthetic, and positively melted on the soft mattress, letting out a soft sigh.

He was out like a light not long after that.

~H~

He was woken up by the banging on his door. His eyes snapped open as he sprang to a sitting position, holding his dagger aloft and looking around wildly. He gaze locked onto the door, at the same time as someone banged on it again.

"Chief Haddock, wake up." Someone from outside the door shouted. "Open this door, chief Haddock." They called again, banging once more for good measure.

"Who is it?" Hiccup called cautiously, getting out of the bed but not letting go of the knife. He haphazardly latched the absolutely necessary straps of his prosthetic so he'd be able to at least stand and move a bit. Toothless had woken up and was standing on the threshold of the balcony, growling menacingly at the door.

Instead of a reply, whoever was outside threw the doors open. Soldiers poured inside, armed to the teeth and more than Hiccup could count with a glance.

"What is this?" He shouted, but the soldiers paid him no mind. They arranged themselves around his side of the room, surrounding him. The ones with the halberds lowered them towards him and Toothless, while the rest with the crossbows took aim.

Toothless roared and closed the distance between them, placing himself between him and the soldiers. He let out a menacing cry again, and the soldiers faltered. Wisps of gas were already escaping the sides of his maw.

"Recall your dragon, Chief Haddock. We mean you no harm!" The leader of the group of soldiers, holding a halberd, called. Hiccup very much doubted that, but he had to avoid a fight. With so many halberds and crossbows against them in such an enclosed space, they had no hope of winning.

"Toothless, back!" He commanded, and the Night Fury relented, taking a few steps back and lowering himself, but not leaving his spot between Hiccup and the soldiers.

"Apologies for barging in, but we need to search your quarters. We're looking for some people, and we need to make sure they're not here. Then, we will leave you in peace."

Hiccup frowned at the soldier. Neither he nor his colleagues had lowered their weapons.

"Alright, you can look. Just don't shoot, yeah?"

The leader nodded, and raised his halberd to the normal position. After this, the rest of the soldiers stopped aiming at them. Half the group moved around them, to search the room, the wardrobe and the

bathroom.

Hiccup cautiously moved around Toothless, patting him on the head to calm him. The dragon was still growling quietly, feeling trapped inside the walled room and with so many armed soldiers. Hiccup hushed him and rubbed his head, and slowly Toothless relaxed, though he remained guarded.

Leaving Toothless, he approached the leader of the guards.

"What's this about? What happened?"

The leader removed his helmet, looking at the viking gravely.

"There's been an attack on the Queen."

~H~

6. Elsa 3

**Notes: **Beta'd by the amazing Sorrows, AKA Yes Miss Lady. Grovel at her feet, weaklings.

~E~

~E~

A Chance Encounter, Chapter Six

~E~

~E~

Elsa was pulled from her slumber by the sound of steel hitting steel.

Groggily she pried her eyes open, and for a few sleepy seconds she wondered what had disturbed her. She pulled a hand out of the warm covers and rubbed her eyes and loose hair. Then her brain caught up with her ears.

She immediately stilled. Muffled shouting and the unmistakable sound of sword on sword approaching her door. There was a shout, the sound of metal striking flesh and something heavy hit her door and slid down.

Adrenaline shot through her and she sprung to her feet, her nightgown twisting around her legs as she tried to surge out of the bed. Quietly she walked to the door, intent on helping her guards against whoever had dared -and, most worrying, managed- to attempt an attack on her private quarters.

She heard a second pained cry followed by the thump of a body falling. Then, the telltale springing sound of crossbows replaced the sound of metal on metal, and she recognized the voices of the two guards who were posted outside her room at night as they cried out and fell to the floor.

Then, there was silence. Elsa held her breath, her hand hovering over the door handle. In the sudden quiet she heard the soft metallic sounds of a crossbow being cocked.

She knew that she should not spring out of the room right now. The attackers would most certainly be holding their breath to see if they'd woken her.

Elsa moved as silently as she could to the corner on the opposite side of her room than the bed. Let them think she was still asleep.

Indeed, a minute later she heard a key being inserted in the keyhole, probably scavenged from the bodies of her guards. The door opened just an inch, but Elsa knew that from that angle all they could see was the vague form of the bed, and without light it was impossible to tell that she wasn't there anymore.

The door was flung open and four men surged in, weapons aloft.

The door was well oiled and opened silently. The torches in the corridor had been doused, Elsa could only make out the dark outlines of several large men. There was a whisper and a heavy thump; a crossbow bolt buried itself into the pillow she had been lying on. Confused by the ensuing silence, the men stepped further into the moonlit room.

She didn't recognize anyone. They were dressed in black and dark brown leather, and most of their heads were covered. Two of them carried crossbows while the other two had drawn swords. They moved inside the room, and Elsa decided to make her move before they realized that she wasn't on the bed.

Stepping out of her corner, she saw outside the open door a fifth attacker, standing above the bloodied bodies of her guards amid two dead enemies. At the sight of her dead subjects her rage bubbled to the surface and ignited, manifesting itself in a swirl of snow around her.

The men noticed her just as she raised her hands and sent a torrent of frost towards the one closest to her. He had managed to turn towards her and instinctively let fly a bolt, but it was frozen mere inches away from the weapon and, a split second later, he was enveloped in snow. The snow immediately crystallized, forming flawless ice around the surprised invader.

Right after sending the torrent of snow, she raised her naked foot and furiously stomped on the ground. Her ice magic surged across the floor, freezing it, heading quickly towards the group of attackers. Before the second archer had time to reload, aim and shoot, the wave was upon them. Ice rose from the ground, shaping itself around the forms of the three remaining men and locking their limbs in place. In the span of two seconds, they were completely entombed in solid blocks of ice.

She turned her glare at the fifth attacker, only to see that he had fled while she dealt with his four friends. No matter, he wouldn't go far. Her eyes lingered on the dead bodies of her people, and if she wasn't so furious she would have cried then and there.

She turned her gaze to the four trapped attackers.

She should spare them. They were spies, assassins, hostages. This latest attempt on her life was well planned and almost successful, she needed to know where it came from.

If she weren't so angry, or if she were a few years younger, uncertain of herself and her powers and with something to prove, she may have spared them.

She spun around her center, her anger manifesting in the form of a loud snarl as she pivoted. She brought clawed hands to bear and, at the completion of her spin and the zenith of her shout, she tore them to the left side. Immediately, three of the four ice prisons shattered into a million pieces, a fate shared by the men trapped within them.

The last one was spared not out of mercy, but because they needed someone to interrogate. In time he, too, would join his dead comrades in eternal damnation.

Her gaze swept over the mess in her room and the bodies outside. Distantly, she heard the sounds of more guards approaching.

A glance outside her window proved that there was not even the idea of sunlight outside. She let out a sigh, rubbing her eyes, suddenly feeling very tired.

She didn't think she'd be getting any sleep tonight.

~E~

Elsa took a deep gulp from her coffee mug, swallowing the bitter liquid, eyes closed as the scalding liquid traveled down her throat. Opening her eyes, she looked around her office. Half a dozen guards were arrayed around the room, weapons ready with the Commander of the castle's security standing at attention in front of her desk, a furious look in his eyes. She did not argue about the extra guards. At least she'd managed to get dressed properly before they had hustled her here.

Elsa felt the beginnings of a migraine. And it was not even 8 in the morning.

>"Progress report." She ordered. The greying man in front of her bowed, and began speaking.<p>

"We've combed the entire castle, my Queen. There was no sight of him."

Elsa scowled, much too tired to be mindful of her expression.

"You mean to tell me that not only did a team of seven people enter my castle undetected, but that one of them managed to escape without getting caught?"

"We are still sweeping, my Queen, but yes, it would appear so." She did not know her head of castle security as well as she should, but could see steel on his eyes. Elsa realized that the man knew that he had messed up, but was not about to sugar-coat it or evade responsibility. Courageous man.

>Just like the three dead guards.<p>

"You do realize that if I hadn't heard the commotion outside my quarters, I would most likely be dead now? That three of our men are dead?"

"Yes, my Queen. I am ready to face the consequences of my inadequacy."

Elsa rubbed her eyes, trying very hard to rein in her anger. She knew it was not truly aimed at the Commander. He was just the closest person with any sliver of responsibility, however small. No, the real blame lay with the culprits. The Commander was just as angry as she was. Probably more, for he must have known the victims personally.

"What about the prisoner?" She asked. He shook his head.

"The assassin was not willing to be taken alive, He managed to kill himself with a hidden dagger the minute we thawed him. I am sorry, my Queen."

"Were you present?"

"No."

"Then do not apologize." She snapped at him.

Perhaps she should have spared more than one.

The Commander nodded, and Elsa returned to rubbing her temples, eyes closed, trying to think of a single positive angle to this whole disaster.

"What can you tell me?"

"We know the castle's patrol schedules, and based on the time of attack and Pratchet's death on the eastern wall, we have an idea of how they got in and the path they followed."

That was something, at least.

"Make sure that hole is closed, Commander. How did they know to evade all the patrols until my quarters?"

"I do not know, my Queen. Patrol routs are rotated on a weekly basis, they could have been uncommonly lucky or stealthy but it is more likely they bought or stole the schedule from someone in the castle." The Commander seemed to choose his next words carefully "My Queen I must speak plainly, Though it is impossible to say yet, a traitor within these walls is the most likely."

"I do not need to tell you this has been the most successful assassination attempt as of yet, do I?" Elsa snapped, her migraine getting the better of her.

"No, my Queen." The Commander stood to attention "I will do my best to protect you from whatever post you assign me on. If only my resignation will be acceptable, then I will do so immediately."

"You are not demoted, Commander Reesh."

He blinked in confusion, gaping at her for a moment. "I'm ... I'm not?"

"No, you're not. You are good at your job and you are doing your best. But I want you to learn from this. Make sure it doesn't happen again."

The Captain bowed deeply. "As you command, my Queen."

"I want another sweep of the castle. Make sure these vermin aren't hiding anywhere. You will inform the families_. Personally_. And prepare the ceremonies for this evening. Court is cancelled. I know that it is impossible to keep the deaths a secret, but be discreet. The families deserve some peace."

"Immediately, my Queen."

"Dismissed."

The soldiers bowed and proceeded to exit the door. The commander bowed as well, but lingered, hesitation in his posture. Elsa had little patience right now.

"Spit it out, Commander."

"My Queen, may I suggest catching some sleep?"

His concern for her was touching, but currently unwanted.

"There is too much to do. Sleep will have to wait."

"Then, at least some breakfast? You've a long day ahead of you, your majesty."

Elsa was about to say that it was too early for breakfast when she caught sight of the grandfather clock to her right. It was a quarter past eight. With a sudden lurch, she realized that she was absolutely starving.

"Yes, I think I can do with some breakfast. Go, Commander."

The man bowed and left her. She sat heavily in her chair for a few minutes more before rising. She straightened her dress, a simple green one that she'd thrown on before exiting her room, and walked out.

She was immediately surrounded by four overeager guards. She dismissed them, knowing very well that there would be no second attempt so soon, and so deep inside the castle.

Her feet took her to the breakfast room mechanically and she wondered if Anna would be waiting for her or if she'd already eaten and had left.

Opening the door, she was immediately assaulted with the sound of her sister's laughter. Entering the room fully, she saw Anna around the breakfast table. Sitting on the chair next to her was the Viking chief. The Chief had something on his hand, a piece of paper that he

was showing to her sister. Their breakfast sat largely ignored in front of them, she couldn't be that late then. As soon as they noticed her, she had the attention of both. The Chief quickly rolled the paper while her sister rose.

Elsa realized that she must look a right sight, dark bags under her eyes, hair unbraided and messy. She found herself caring little, even after the realization.

Anna rushed to her and drew her in a fierce hug.

"Elsa, what happened? I was so worried!" Her sister said. Elsa repressed a grimace at Anna's loud voice next to her ears. It was not helping her migraine.

He didn't say anything, but she could see his eyes roaming her body, checking for injuries.

"I am fine, Anna. Completely unhurt. Release me, please." Her sister did so, flushing in embarrassment. Apparently Anna didn't trust her word, because she, too, looked her over.

Elsa walked around her sister and almost slumped on the chair next to hers. She felt the Viking's gaze on her, but cared little right now. She was too tired, and there much more important things going on than appearing strong in front of a foreigner.

"Good morning, Queen Elsa." He said, tone neutral.

"Hardly good. Three men have died."

The Chief frowned, and her sister gasped. Immediately, Elsa was drawn in another fierce hug, which was awkward and a little precarious, considering they were both seated.

Elsa wanted to push her sister away, such was her irritation. She held herself, however, knowing that that would be an overreaction. After half a minute of the hug and her sister's soft words, she found herself fighting back tears instead of anger, and hugged her sister just as hard.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the Chief shuffling awkwardly in his seat, and realized that he must not be sure if he should leave and let the two sisters be alone.

The last thing she wanted right now was for people to treat her different. She didn't want pity. She didn't die, and she wasn't a family member of the dead. It was them that had it the hardest, and her responsibility issues would take a back-seat.

She released herself from her sister's hug after a last affectionate squeeze, and turned forward, looking down at her plate, and watched the Chief out of the corner of her eye.

It occurred to her that she was being extremely emotional in front of a foreign royal and faction leader, something that she generally tried her hardest to avoid. Perhaps she would even care about that fact, a day or a week from now. Currently, the knowledge simply passed her by without a reaction.

"I'm sorry for my state, Chief Hiccup. The loss of my subjects always hits me hard." There was no helping this confession, and the truth of her words had already become obvious to him even before she had said them aloud.

"I'm sorry to hear that." He told her, and she found only truth in his words. She was uncertain, however, if he was sorry for the loss of the men or her own strong feelings towards it. She wasn't sure she wanted to know, either.

She shook her head. Platitudes had no place, at that moment. She began piling food at her plate, and took another mug of much needed coffee.

>"Your rooms were searched, were they not?" She asked. Both Anna and the Chief nodded.

Elsa looked at the Viking. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

He shook his head. "My convenience is of no consequence in light of this."

True, it wasn't, but no one could fault her for being nice.

"I was told you were attacked. Is that true?" The Viking asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Tragically, three guards lost their lives, but the attack was foiled." She did not mention that one escaped. Foreigners could do without that knowledge. And besides, it wouldn't be a great leap of logic for him to make by himself, considering the castle was being searched.

Anna squeezed her shoulder in support, and she spared her sister a grateful, if tired, smile.

"Court will be cancelled today for the funerals." Anna nodded in understanding, and hesitantly turned to her food, stealing worried glances at her every so often. Elsa knew what Anna was afraid of. She couldn't placate her, however, because the younger girl wasn't exactly wrong.

"Were you targeted because of your command of ice magic?" The chief asked neutrally. She didn't turn her head as she replied.

"Perhaps. Or maybe it was a political move. Who knows?"

"Is this a frequent occurrence?"

Anna glared at the Viking in disapproval, and she saw the Chief blink at her sister for two seconds, before his eyes widened and he turned back towards her.

"Apologies. I did not mean to intrude or be insensitive."

"To answer your question," Elsa said, ignoring his backpedaling "every few months I receive at least one attempt on my life. The kidnapping attempts stopped pretty early. All of these are on the public chronicle of the castle."

Of course, there were at least as many instances that never made it to the public archives, but the chief didn't need to know that.

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Yes, well, it's a risk we have to take." She knew he would understand this much, at least. Judging by the plethora of healed wounds on his body, the chief had seen his fair share of sticky situations.

"I'm sorry about your soldiers, too."

Her fingers clenched around her fork.

"Thank you. They were brave men."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the chief study her face, open his mouth and promptly close it, before turning back to his plate. She was mildly curious as to what he'd been about to say, but not enough so as to ask him about it.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, until they had been mostly sated and were slowing down. She could see Anna cast glances her way as if she wanted to talk to her, before looking at the Chief and shaking her head slightly. Apparently, Anna preferred to mother her in private. Or she had something to say that was only for her ears.

"Chief Hiccup," Elsa said. Said Viking raised his head and looked at her, expectantly.

"Yes?"

"Come by my office around noon. I will lead you to the map room, that you may get an idea of the surrounding geography and orient yourself in regards to Berk."

"Are you sure? You must be very busy today. I can understand waiting a few days longer."

"No," Elsa shook her head. "We've put this off for long enough. Come by my office, and we'll get it out of the way."

"Alright."

Grasping for a distraction that food simply could not provide, Elsa fished around for a new subject.

"I saw you showing something to Anna, earlier. What was it?"

The chief's eyes widened and he pushed the rolled paper deeper into the pocket of his tunic.

"Oh, that. It's nothing, really. Just a sketch."

"Don't be silly, Chief Haddock!" Anna said, looking at him like he'd said chocolate tasted terrible. "You're very good!" She turned to Elsa. "You should see, he made this amazing sketch of the castle. All of it! It's amazing!"

Her sister looked at the chief again, motioning encouragingly with her hand. "Go on, Chief Hiccup, show her."

Elsa wondered briefly when he had become 'Chief Hiccup' rather than 'Chief Haddock'. She'd thought that calling him Chief Hiccup was her thing.

Said Viking was currently doing his best impression of a blushing schoolgirl.

>"It's really nothing. Just something to pass the time. I'm really not even that-"

"Show me, please." Elsa interrupted him.

"Well ... alright." He finally relented, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment.

He retrieved the paper from his pocket and rolled it open, smoothing it for a while before passing it on to her.

It was the unfinished sketch that she'd seen two days ago, on his desk. Only it wasn't unfinished. Previously bland and empty shapes were now filled with detail; previously clear parts of the paper were now full of the missing parts. Towers and walls and buildings. On top of the highest tower, the Arendelle standard with the royal crest waved proudly.

"You're actually very good." She said, impressed despite herself. The Chief sputtered a few soft denials, but she paid him no mind, inspecting the sketch more closely.

She saw a few flaws, the second time around. A few lines drawn a little more than they should, a tower than was a little shorter than it was in reality, a building with one less chimney than it really had. Even a corner that was a little bit smudged.

Despite these, she was very impressed. The Chief was very good at sketching. He probably did it in two sittings, and if what Ernie told her was true, he didn't even take that long to do it.

She turned her attention back to the Chief, across from Anna, but he'd stopped speaking and was staring squarely at his beans, as if they'd eat themselves if stared at hard enough. Elsa guessed that he was trying to keep contained any further embarrassed denials.

"I find myself surprised with everything new we learn about you, Chief Hiccup." She heard herself say. The Viking looked up at her, surprise evident in his eyes if not in his expression. Her sister only had a smile to offer as she continued her train of thought.

"Two days ago we learned that you're a very capable smith, and now a painter?"

"I would hardly call that painting." The chief said, grasping onto the only objection he could find.

"Call it what you will. Your 'sketches' are quite skilful."

"Yes, well, I have very deft fingers." The chief said.

"This sounds like one of those things with a story behind them." Anna

said, grinning. The man shrugged.

"It's really not much of a story."

"We'd like to hear it, nonetheless." Elsa said.

"Okay. Well, I guess it has to do with the fact that I'm not really your average Viking."

Anna frowned in confusion. "Of course, not, you are the Chief."

"That's not what I mean."

"You ride a dragon." Elsa ventured.

"That's not it, either." The chief shook his head. "It has more to do with my body type."

"Your ... body type?" Elsa said, unable to stop herself. Anna looked at her and her face broke into a wide grin, her eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

Elsa blushed scarlet for a single mortifying second, before snapping out of it and glaring at her sister. She did not mean it like that!

The chief went on, blessedly oblivious to her inner struggle. Or at least, she hoped he was oblivious and not simply being merciful.

"Yes. You see, the average Viking is much ... well, bigger, than me. Remember the Captain of the contingent that brought us here?" At Elsa's nod, he continued. "Well, my people are in average about twice his size, never mind mine. That's not a problem right now, of course. I can hold my own against any of them, but this wasn't always the case. When I was younger, before I developed such things as balance or hand-eye coordination or my own way of fighting, I was looked upon as quite useless for Viking society."

Elsa and Anna looked him in confusion. The future chief of the tribe was looked upon as useless?

The Chief noticed their disbelieving stares and raised an eyebrow.

"What? It was true. I couldn't fight to save my life. My attempts to help with anything war-related usually ended in disaster. Not to mention that I was the clumsiest person you'd have ever met, with two left feet."

A small grin played on his features. "Well, things changed since then. I don't have any left feet anymore, for one."

The sheer fact that he was joking about his crippling injury was too much for Anna and she broke into a fit of giggles, drawing a satisfied smile from the Chief.

Elsa was not as entertained. What kind of person does it take, to function perfectly with such a debilitating handicap and even use it

as joke fodder? Could she have done that, in his place? She'd never thought particularly hard about injuries, never mind dismemberments. It was something that she factually knew could occur, but never mentally associated with herself. The thought chilled her.

"Anyway," the chief continued "at the time all I had going for me was the dexterity of my hands. My father assigned me as the blacksmith's apprentice, and I guess things spiraled from there. I knew all I had was an overactive imagination and capable hands, so I learned anything I could that included these two. I became a blacksmith, I learned to sketch, I learned to write, I learned to handle wood and leather, I learned how to cook. By the time I was fifteen, I was quite the handy person to have around, though I still wouldn't fight."

"You can cook?" Anna blurted out.

"Sure," the chief nodded "but nowhere near this kind of quality, you understand." He said, gesturing at the breakfast table that had been untouched for the last few minutes.

"When did it all change?" Elsa asked. "When did you become proficient in combat?" She never for a second doubted his current proficiency. He moved like her best fighters moved, smooth and controlled despite his leg. His weapons were well worn but perfectly maintained and were never far from his side. Thankfully, his time inside the castle was an exception to this.

"It all started with Toothless, really."

"How so?"

"Well, Toothless is very strong. There aren't many things that are a threat to him. And I felt ... inadequate, I suppose. I wanted to protect him as he protected me, and so I eventually learned. I started with the bow."

Elsa's vision was suddenly filled with the frozen tip of an arrow, and she was waving her hands, trying desperately to alter the path of another before it pierced her-

"Elsa?" Her sister's voice snapped her out of her funk, and she shook her head to clear her memories, noticing the worried looks on both of them.

>"Sorry, I spaced out. Do go on."<p>

"Eh, I probably shouldn't. That's about it, anyway."

Elsa noticed the time on the clock on the opposite wall.

"I have to go. Thank you both for the company, but there are a lot of matters that require my attention."

She rose, and the other two followed her example. Outside the room, her sister once again hugged her, promising to see her later, before walking away with a wave.

"I'll bring Kristoff by to meet you, chief Hiccup!" She called as she left. Apparently Anna must have told the chief a bit about herself before she came in.

"I'm looking forward to it, Princess Anna." The chief called back, before turning to her.

"I'll be in your office at noon." He said, and she nodded. Then he, too, turned and left.

Elsa rubbed her eyes again. Thankfully her headache had abated, but the day was just starting. There was a lot to be done.

~E~

True to her predictions, the castle was abuzz with activity. A hornet's nest had been stirred, and now guards were everywhere, rushing around the castle like they were actually doing something. Servants were traveling in groups, glancing fearfully around corners.

For hours, Elsa walked to every section of the castle, assuring the staff and everyone else there that yes, she was fine; no, there would be no other attack as they had caught the culprits and yes; they could trust her when she said that everything was fine.

The castle was in a state between panic and war preparations, which Elsa did her best to calm before things got out of hand.

It hadn't been the first attempt on her life. But it had been by far the most successful. Never before had the castle been breached to this extent. The closest anyone else had gotten inside the castle was the Courtyard.

Usually, attempts on her life happened when she was outside, where a lone assassin would try his luck by springing from shadows and corners, or a shooter would try to snipe her from a rooftop or tree. Always failure, almost always without victims other than the attacker himself.

But this time, the castle security had been completely compromised, and three loyal men lay dead. There would be hell to pay for this. Elsa intended to see to that. She smelled a rat, and she would not rest until it was found. Nevertheless, the wider investigation had to be kept discreet, else the traitorous vermin apparently infecting her palace would spook and bolt back to whatever country was financing this latest attempt.

She found herself in her office, getting updated in the guards' progress, or lack thereof, in locating the last attacker. A peasant from the edge of town had reported a stolen horse, and it was believed that the invader had made good his escape. Elsa fumed throughout the meeting, until she at last dismissed the men giving the report, before she did something she'd later regret.

Being Queen was much harder than their parents had made it seem.

"My Queen?" A beautiful older woman slipped around her door. Her long black hair was loose this time, and her dark blue dress covered everything from her shoulders to her feet.

She had completely missed the knock on her door. She was slipping.

Elsa blinked harshly, chasing the fatigue out of her eyes.

"Yes, Marina?"

Officially Elai Marina was the Head Courtier and a member of Elsa's inner council. She oversaw the court, including planning the official functions, balls and other events. Unofficially, she was also a high ranking member of the kingdom's intelligence gathering force and the third most powerful woman in Arendelle.

Her long black hair was let loose this time, and her dark blue dress covered everything from her shoulders to her feet.

"My Queen, how are you?"

_Not this again. _

Elsa attempted to be patient. "I'm fine, thank you. Just a little tired. Can I help you?"

Marina seemed to hesitate, but nevertheless stepped closer to Elsa's desk before speaking.

"Lord Doublay has arrived, my Queen. He is already asking for you."

Elsa rubbed her eyes. Just what she needed right now. He had to pick the worst time possible.

"Did you inform him on the matters of Court?"

"I did, my Queen. He requested a private audience."

"Whatever for, did he mention?" They both knew the answer, but Elsa's irritation could hardly be kept in check.

"He did not. However-"

"Can you just tell him that I do not want to, nor will I ever, marry his son? Then we can save ourselves time and a headache, mmm?"

Marina frowned. Elsa inwardly sighed, maybe she was being unfair.

"My Queen, Lord Doublay is an important-"

"I know!" Elsa snapped, earlier thoughts forgotten. Marina dutifully closed her mouth, prompting Elsa to continue. "I know all about Doublay's position in Megara's government. I am well aware of his son's interest in me. I am also well informed on the potential benefits of a direct union between Arendelle and Megara, our second greatest trade supplier in the mainland. None of this changes the fact that I will not marry his son."

By the end of her tirade, Elsa was almost shouting. Marina did not say anything, and Elsa suddenly realized that she was breathing hard. She closed her eyes and did her best to calm down. She took deep, slow breaths.

After a minute, the Head Courtier spoke.

"My Queen?"

"I'm good now, Elai. I'm sorry for my outburst." Marina gave her a soft smile that did not reach her eyes. "Make the arrangements for the meeting with Doublay. I will give him the diplomatic version of what I just told you."

"It will be done, my Queen."

Seeing that Marina had still more to say, Elsa nodded her head, prompting the slightly older woman to speak.

"Your Majesty, I know that now is not the time, especially after this morning. But you must know eventually you will have to start considering marriage offers, if not to pacify the population then at least to establish a line of-"

"There is no need for a line of succession." Elsa cut her off. "Anna is my heir, and she is well on her way to making plenty of heirs of her own, if palace gossip is to be believed."

Marina's carefully neutral expression said it all. Elsa was well aware that not everyone was as accepting of Anna's relationship with Kristoff as she was. Anna, in one of her brilliant idea moments, had decided to wait a few years before getting married, to Kristoff or anyone else. While understandable after her experience with Hans, the scumbag Prince from the Southern Isles, it lead to a lot of rumours circulating about her.

"The Princess' relationship with our Ice Master aside, having your sister as your heir is only a temporary measure. The people need to see the royal line continue from parent to child, not between siblings. The longer you remain unmarried, the more will you be spoken about in unfavourable terms."

"Let them talk." Elsa said. "They will get used to it eventually."

Marina's frown threatened to split her face, and Elsa raised a hand to stop her when the Head Courtier opened her mouth to say something.

"Listen, Marina. I understand what you're saying. We've had this discussion before. My answer remains the same. I have given and will continue to give all of myself to the kingdom of Arendelle. I keep only one thing for myself. My ability to love and marry whoever I want. That is the only line that I will not cross, not while I have a choice in the matter. I will do everything in my power to help my kingdom, but if and when I get married, it will be to someone I choose, for selfish reasons. It is the only thing I will do for Elsa Ellesmyre, rather than Arendelle."

Elai regarded her for a minute, head cocked slightly to the side.

"Your mother-"

"My mother," Elsa interrupted her again, anger blistering. "Was very, very fortunate to have been chosen by my father, who was a good man, and eventually grew to love him. She was the exception, rather than the rule. Regardless, I am not my mother. I loved and admired her, but I will follow my own path in life."

At this, Marina could do nothing but bow.

"As you say, Queen Elsa."

Elsa's expression softened and she brought her hand to rub at her temples. She was really snappish today. Understandable, but inexcusable. Queens can scarcely afford to get snippy.

"I'm sorry, Marina, but this is my decision. It will not change."

"I understand, my Queen. Though I disagree with you, I admire your conviction, nonetheless."

Elsa nodded "Thank you. It means a lot to me."

"I will go make the arrangements, then."

"Very well. I have to arrange the funeral soon, in any case."

Dismissed, Marina curtsied, though she hesitated a moment "One last thing, before I go?"

"Go ahead."

"I saw the dragon on my way here."

Marina seemed slightly troubled, which was interesting. Elsa leaned forward on the desk, resting her chin on her interconnected fingers.

"Oh? Did something happen?"

"No, my Queen. I was passing through the Gardens when I saw the dragon and King Haddock."

"Chief."

"Beg your pardon?"

"As I mentioned at court, the correct term is chief, not king."

"Apologies. Yes, Chief Haddock and the dragon were at the gardens."

Elsa failed to see what was troubling about this.

"Doing what?"

"The chief was drawing something in a notebook. They both just lay in the grass. The dragon was sprawled on its back and the chief was resting his back against it."

"This is all very interesting, but is there a point to it?"

"I'm not sure. He saw me and he waved cordially, and I returned the gesture."

"Elai, do you have a point?"

"I guess it seemed strange to find a royal in such casual stance."

"It is not our place to question how foreign royals conduct themselves, so long as they do not go against our laws and rules while within our borders."

"I'm sorry, my Queen. I'm just rambling. With your permission, I will go now."

Elsa nodded. Marina bowed once again and left the room. Elsa recognized the look of half-formed suspicions and ideas, but she couldn't do anything about it before Marina herself made sense of them.

She was hardly alone for five minutes before there was a knock on her door again.

"Enter."

The guard outside opened the door, announcing the visitor. "The Commander General Mertok."

"My Queen." Mertok said, bowing deeply as he entered the room and the door was closed.

"General. Good morning."

"It is hardly morning, my Queen. Noon is almost upon us."

"Is it?" Elsa asked, surprised. She glanced at the clock at the wall. Indeed, it was almost twelve. "Ah, so it is. I must have lost track of time."

She turned her gaze back towards the older man.

"I assume you have been briefed on the situation?"

"Yes. It is most worrying."

"That it is, General. What do you make of it?"

"Where to begin? The loss of life is a tragedy, but equally important is finding out how the perpetrators got so far inside. They completely bypassed the outer defences."

"Do you have a theory?"

"Speculation only, my Queen."

"Indulge me, General."

His brow furrowed, his eyes narrowing in thought and he rubbed his

short beard with his right hand.

"As I said before, I cannot explain it in any way other than that they somehow knew our patrol schedules and guard choke points."

"A traitor, then?"

"It is the most likely explanation, yes."

"Perhaps they were experts in infiltration?" She asked, not really believing it, herself.

"Maybe so but even if such were the case, knowing patrol schedules is one of the most important aspects of a successful infiltration."

"We must assume we have a traitor within the castle, then" Elsa said heavily.

Mertok nodded.

"Can you compile a list of possible suspects, General?"

"That would be harder than it seems, my Queen."

Elsa frowned.

"How so?"

"The people who have complete access to the patrol plans are people we'd normally consider above suspicion, such as guard commander Reesh, the members of the inner council, you and your sister."

"I see."

"And the number of people who could have figured out the patrols through snooping and observation are too high to realistically investigate. That list includes all servants, all current guests at the castle, and all guards stationed here."

"Surely these people could not have learned the schedules of our patrols so deep inside the castle and in such detail."

"Probably not, my Queen, but it is not impossible. And so long as there is a chance, however slight, we cannot discount the possibility."

"What can we do?"

"There is little we can do, short of emptying the castle and closing the gates."

"Which will never happen under my rule."

Mertok tipped his head at this.

"As you say, so we can't do that. All we can realistically do, besides quietly investigate further is tighten security. We figure out exactly how they breached the castle, close the hole, and try to learn who had the exact knowledge necessary to make such an infiltration possible."

Elsa nodded.

"I will leave these matters to you, then, General."

"As you command, my Queen. If I may?"

"Go ahead."

"I am not exactly suggesting anything, but I need to inform you that the chances of Chief Haddock's arrival a scant few days before the nearly successful attempt on your life being coincidental are very slim."

Elsa frowned.

"What are you saying, general? That Chief Haddock was somehow involved?"

"I am saying that there is a good possibility."

She shook her head.

"Chief Haddock has been under constant surveillance when outside of his quarters. I have seen to that."

"That is true. It certainly lowers the chances of it being him that figured out the patrol schedules, but does not clear him of suspicion."

"Suspicion?" Elsa asked slowly, drawing the word out. The General nodded.

"Chief Haddock seems earnest, but we must not let that cloud our judgement. Prince Hans seemed earnest, too, and we were all played by him."

"Chief Haddock is not Hans."

"Of course not, my Queen. But, similarly, Prince Hans is not the only person that would do such a thing."

"Tell me your thoughts and tarry no longer, General."

"What do we know of him, truly? His appearance was very convenient, was it not?"

"Need I remind you, General, that it was us who found him, rather than the other way around?"

"And how can we be certain of that? He was found right on top of your path. By his own words, his homeland is very far away. He could have been waiting. What are the chances that it was truly a chance encounter?"

This gave Elsa pause. The general, despite it being in his job description to be paranoid, had a point. It truly was bizarre, how they met like this.

"What you say is not exactly wrong, General, but Chief Haddock has

already had the chance to kill me and didn't. I have told you this before."

"I do not presume to have the entire case solved, my Queen. Perhaps killing you was not his intention, initially. Perhaps he had nothing to do with the attack and I'm just being suspicious for no reason, or maybe he has his own plans separate of the attack yesterday. It could be a number of things."

"Which brings us back to square one."

"Perhaps, but I would like you to remain alert around him. Are we even certain he is who he claims?"

Elsa again paused, deep in thought. The General's fears echoed many of her own.

"No, we are not. His word and his presumed honour are the only things we go by."

"A dangerous thing to do."

"Admittedly so, but after he spared my life I was willing to believe his word that he was the sovereign of a distant land."

"Distant enough to be nearly impossible to confirm in time?"

"So it would seem."

"There is also the fact of his age."

"What about it?"

"Faction leaders so young are rare. Yes, I am aware of your situation, but it is an exception rather than a rule."

"He related the stories of the deaths of his parents to me and Anna, earlier this morning."

"Of course he did." His sarcasm was not lost on Elsa.

Mertok paused, his stance sagging a little.

"I am grateful to Chief Haddock for sparing my Queen's life, but it is my job to be worried about and consider such things."

"I understand, General. You are not being illogical in your fears. Nevertheless, I feel that Chief Haddock is telling the truth, regarding his chieftainship if nothing else."

"Because of the dragon? His taming of the beast is impressive, but not necessarily proof of his word."

Elsa shook her head. "It's not that. I have seen no concrete proof of this but ... I'm not sure how to explain it. I can feel it. The air of command around him, the ease of someone used to being listened to, used to giving out ordersâ€|" She trailed off suddenly, realising how flimsy her argument sounded.

"Perhaps he is confident by nature, or a lord used to ordering about

servants, or simply presenting a very skillful act."

Elsa nodded "That is, of course, a possibility, but this kind of speculation can only take us around in circles. There is no way to confirm this short of going to Berk ourselves, and even then we'd have to rely on Chief Haddock's direction to go there and assume he's being truthful."

"Then how can you be certain?"

"I cannot, General. It is possible that he is not the chief of a distant land, rather only a boy who managed to tame a dragon. After all, it is easy to add chiefdom when people are trying to process your pet dragon. Do not think I have not considered the possibility; however I feel he is telling the truth and I will not risk possibly offending a dragon riding Viking Chief on the off chance that he is not."

The general threw her a dubious look.

"Surely it can't be only that?"

Elsa sighed. "Of course not. The thing is; if he is faking it, then he's doing a terrible job of it. Don't you think that someone trying to pass as a royal would act more like we'd expect a royal to, rather than Chief Haddock's general behavior?"

"All in the name of posing as someone from far away."

"His behavior and your theory don't match, general. There is no basis for suspicion besides the default on anyone we don't personally know. And let us not forget that the sole reason I brought him here was to avoid an international incident. What would happen if we were to suddenly distrust him, maybe even throw him out, and it turns out that he wasn't lying? We'll be the laughing stock of nations, not to mention the possibility of war with the vikings. Remember that our goal is to get on his good side, not his bad one."

"I don't know, my Queen. This whole situation seems very suspicious to me. And your reasoning hasn't exactly assuaged me."

"As I said, it is nothing concrete. I just feel that this is our best course of action for the time being, and that I could not be duped on this matter."

"It takes one to know one, does it?"

"Something like that. I am fairly certain that his status as chieftain is legitimate."

"Then I will trust your judgement, in this as in all things."

"Thank you, General. Know that I am keeping a close eye on Chief Hiccup."

Mertok's expression changed slightly, but it was gone before Elsa had time to decipher its meaning.

They were quiet for some time, thinking over everything they had said.

"Permission to speak freely, my Queen."

"Granted."

"You look terrible, Elsa."

Elsa blinked. Once, twice. Then she burst into laughter. The general himself smiled at her, and she was acutely reminded that this was the man who had sat her on his knee and told her stories when she was still a tiny little girl full of curiosity and wonder, running around at her father's meetings and making a nuisance of herself.

"Thank you, Shad. A girl always wants to hear such compliments."

"You should get some rest, is all I'm saying."

"I'll take that into consideration."

The man sighed "Meaning you won't do it."

Elsa smiled at this. He knew her well.

"Probably not, but thank you for your concern."

"If that will be all, I'll be taking my leave."

"Go ahead. Will you be attending the funeral?"

"Yes, my Queen."

The general bowed, then turned on his heel and marched for the door. Elsa followed him with her eyes, a fond smile still on her face. As soon as the door opened, the smile vanished.

There, outside the door, stood the aforementioned Viking chief in the flesh. She was not worried about him overhearing anything, thankfully, since her office was perfectly insulated.

Mertok noticed the Chief outside and stilled for a moment, but then bowed his head, greeted the man, and went on his way.

"His majesty, Chief Haddock" the guard announced, and the chief stepped right into her office.

"Queen Elsa, Greetings." He said. Elsa glanced at her clock, noticing that it was a quarter past twelve. She'd stood him up.

"And to you, Chief Hiccup."

She noticed his eyes take in her appearance critically, and no doubt he noticed the bags under her eyes or the messy way her hair was braided, or her rumpled dress, or the two empty cups of coffee on her desk. When he spoke, she was irrationally thankful that for once today, it wasn't a query regarding her state of health.

"You asked to see me?" He said, making no mention of being made to wait for a quarter of an hour.

"Yes. As I mentioned, it is high time we understood where exactly we stand in relation to each other."

The chief's mouth opened once, twice, but he seemed at a loss. The third time, he found his voice.

"I'm sorry?" he said carefully.

"I meant Berk and Arendelle." She clarified.

"Oh. Yes, you said as much during breakfast. Silly me, I forgot." He rubbed the back of his head, obviously embarrassed about something. Elsa didn't ponder on it much.

She rose and walked around her desk.

"Follow me." She said, and headed for the smaller door at the right wall of her office. The young man followed her without complaint or questions.

Through the door was another office, though this one smaller, more cramped with stuff. A wide table in the middle was full of charts, maps and books. The various furniture lining the walls were equally full of similar things.

"I have already prepared several maps of the Viking areas, as we know them, and the spaces in between." Elsa said, making space at the table and leaving only the relevant maps on it.

"This is Arendelle." She said, pointing at a specific map which depicted her kingdom in its entirety.

Chief Hiccup approached the table and her, staring at the maps in concentration. She let him study them for a few minutes. He worked methodically, first with the map of Arendelle, then their map of the Viking provinces.

"It's more or less correct, but much too crude." he murmured, studying the map of the northern areas carefully.

"Would you be willing to help make them more accurate? I've witnessed your ability with a quill or pencil."

This was perhaps a risky move on her part, because there was no immediate gain for him if he gave her a clearer idea of his lands, while there was a lot of new information in it for her. Nevertheless, she saw it as a fair deal, and was fairly certain that he would, too.

"Not a problem. I'll get on it tomorrow or sometime soon. I'll have to take this with me though, and a couple of empty pieces for copies."

"You will be given everything that you require."

He worked in silence again, aligning maps and comparing them to each other. Elsa watched his face, brow creased in concentration, eyes squinted. His tongue peeked out to wet his lips.

She averted her gaze after that.

"I think I've got it." He declared after half an hour of study. Elsa moved closer, to see what he'd done with the maps. Arendelle was the one closest to them, and he'd arranged the maps between her kingdom and Berk in order.

"Look at the Viking areas." He instructed, and she complied.

"What am I looking for?"

"Something that doesn't exist. See, here? On the north most part of this map, all that is drawn are some rock protrusions, probably from hearsay. This area is where my islands are, and many more besides. There's a whole archipelago that's missing from this map. Many Viking tribes live there, including mine. Your map is grossly inaccurate."

He paused, before averting his gaze from the map to look at her. From the seriousness of his expression, Elsa guessed that this was an important moment.

"I'll make you a proper map of the archipelago. Alright?"

Now she understood. Yes, he was offering much. But then again, she'd offered the same when she showed him perfect maps of Arendelle and the surrounding geography, hadn't she? But she had promised, and had made no clause as to receiving the same treatment from him. It wasn't the same thing.

"Thank you. That would be most helpful."

The Chief frowned. "Would it?"

Oops, that came out wrong.

"Perhaps. We will speak of this in more detail in the coming days. I think an agreement between our people is not outside the realm of possibility."

"What do you have in mind, Queen Elsa?"

She shook her head. "Not now. We will talk of this more later."

He still seemed suspicious, but he let it go. Was he being nice and not insisting? Or was it something else?

What's going on in your head, Hiccup?

They moved away from the map room and back into her office. The chief seemed unsure of what to do for a moment, but Elsa went to her chair and sat.

"Please, take a seat." She asked, and he obliged, taking the one directly in front of her desk.

He looked at her, inviting her to begin conversation.

"How have you been finding your stay here so far?" His eyebrow rose marginally at her opener, but he didn't comment on it.

"It is more than I'd imagined it would be. In the good sense, I assure you. I've met many interesting people, and I've yet to see the whole castle; which is fascinating, by the way. I have no complaints."

"Not even after last night's intrusion?" He frowned at this.

"I hardly feel the need to complain when you yourself suffered a much more irritating intrusion."

Irritating was one way to put it.

"So we said in the morning, yes."

"Can I ask you for something, Queen Elsa?"

Elsa shuffled a little, sitting straighter in her seat.

"If it is within my power to grant."

"I would like your permission to take Toothless to the sky."

"You mean ... fly?" He nodded.

"Yes. We've been grounded for long enough, I think. He'll soon start getting irritable."

She hesitated, thinking furiously, he must have noticed something in her expression, because he spoke again.

"If you're thinking that I'll fly off, don't. I have no reason to do that, plus I will leave all my stuff and my weapons here if it would put your mind at ease."

She coughed. "I wasn't thinking that at all."

The Chief's knowing smile almost made her snap at him, but she swallowed that urge and decided to move on before she embarrassed herself any further.

"It sounds reasonable. When were you thinking?"

"I was thinking of today, but that's obviously not possible. I'm sure that with the funeral coming up you don't want to deal with your subjects being terrified by a flying dragon."

"An exaggeration, perhaps, but true. I would appreciate it if you waited until tomorrow. I would also like to be present."

He raised his eyebrow again, surprised.

"You want to come with us?"

Elsa was visibly taken aback by this. What?

"What do you mean?"

"I mean fly. With us. Is that what you want?"

"No, most definitely not." She shook her head. No, getting on that

... on Toothless and flying was the furthest thing from her mind right now. She saw the Chief's frown, but nothing she could say would wipe it off.

"It would do you good, you know. It's a great experience."

She looked at him oddly, for a moment forgetting that he was foreign royalty.

"It's crazy."

The chief smiled at this. Smiled! More proof for her. It was crazy, and he was crazy.

"Perhaps. A little crazy in our lives makes things interesting. When was the last time you did something crazy?"

"I prefer to avoid crazy things that could get me killed, thank you very much."

He frowned a little.

"I said crazy, Queen Elsa, not dumb. There's a difference."

"I fail to see it, in this instance."

"Yes, you do." He said, and Elsa bristled. Now he was mocking her, again.

"Would it be impossible for something to go wrong and for you to fall to your death?"

He waited for a few seconds, weighing his response. He must have known that the question was unfairly posed, but he replied nonetheless.

"No, it is not impossible."

"Then I'd rather not do something so risky if there isn't a perfectly valid reason."

He shook his head. "Fair enough. So if you didn't mean that, what did you mean when you mentioned being present?"

"Before you fly, take-off, whatever you call it. It's best if I'm there, so as to assuage anyone watching."

"Sounds reasonable."

"When, exactly?"

"Either a few hours before or after lunch. We can figure out an exact time at breakfast."

"That is acceptable." She waited a few second to ascertain the matter was closed before continuing. "Will you be attending the funeral tonight?"

He sobered up immediately, like she did.

"If I am allowed to."

"Everyone is invited. Ernie will take you to the chapel. If he doesn't, just follow the people."

"I assume that Toothless should not come?"

"It'd be best if he didn't. It would complicate things unnecessarily, and we don't want any hitches with the ceremony."

He nodded. "Yes, I agree. Toothless will stay here."

Elsa took a deep breath, thinking of the best possible way to broach the next subject. Their interaction so far had been telling, but it was time for the finishing touch. This was a risk, but it was one she thought she had to take, if only to confirm what she already felt she knew.

"There is ... another matter that we need to discuss."

"Oh?"

She hesitated for a few seconds, trying to come up with the right words.

"I implore you not to take offense at what I will say."

She could see that she sparked his curiosity. "Speak freely, Queen Elsa."

"I have received word, from several people, that I should be wary of you." She said at last, and watched him. His face didn't outwardly change, which indicated to her that he expected to hear more. "That you may not be to be trusted. That it is possible that you've been lying about Berk and your status."

The changes were minutiae, but Elsa spotted the signs of anger as soon as they appeared. "Are you calling me a liar, Queen Elsa?" His tone was level, but grave, as if in warning. Elsa felt the danger tangible in the air, as if she was walking on thin ice.

"Of course not," Elsa said carefully. "However, it has been said to me, and I can't exactly disagree, that we have no reason to believe you other than your word."

"Who said that?"

"It doesn't matter." She leveled a stern look his way. Angry or not, he wasn't changing the subject. "The point is that I've invited you here and treated you as an equal, based on the premise that you are chief of your tribe, as you claimed."

"Which I am." He pointed out.

"So you say, and I believe you," she hastily added after his expression darkened even more "but that may not always be enough. I was attacked in my own bed two days after you arrived, suspicion is natural in such circumstances. It may be unfair but it is not unwarranted."

She did not blink, watching his reaction intently. He seemed frustrated, but did a good job of holding most of it from showing.

"I understand that Queen Elsa, but what do you want from me? We don't have stamps in Berk, or signet rings. Short of taking you to Berk I can present you with no convincing proof. Why tell me this now?"

"I felt that you should know."

He no longer kept his irritation from his face, almost-but-not-quite scowling.

"You invited me here. If you feel that I no longer meet the criteria for being a guest, or that I have lied to you, I shall saddle Toothless and leave immediately."

"Goodness, no. That's not it at all." She raised her hand to stop him from saying something in anger. "Please, listen to me. I didn't mean to offend. I believe you; else I would not have brought you here in the first place."

This seemed to mollify him somewhat, and his scowl disappeared.

"Then, what is it? Why tell me?"

"Because it is something that you should be aware of. You have many eyes on you, chief Hiccup. Whether you wanted to come here or not, you represent Berk now."

He closed his eyes, rubbing them with his thumb and finger.

"You're right." He said eventually. "And I'm glad you let me know. I'm not sure if I can do anything to prove my identity to you. Anything that I could say without compromising my people could be known by anyone who's lived there, such as Berk's place on the map, and that doesn't necessarily prove my chieftainship. I am aware that the difference between us and Arendelle is great enough that when people see me and compare me to their own sovereigns, the behaviors don't match. But I don't know what I can do to fix that. I won't start acting like someone else just because someone in your council told you that they don't like me."

"Nor would I ask you to. The concerns will pass with time. I tell you this so you can keep an eye out." While I keep an eye on you. "And in any case, if what I have in mind comes to pass, then any and all doubts will be gone."

He raised a questioning eyebrow. "Is this the secret idea that I'm not allowed to know about?"

"It's not that you're not allowed, exactly. It's just that I'm still forming it inside my own head. As soon as it takes shape, you'll be the first to know."

He nodded curtly. "Sounds fair enough to me, Queen Elsa. Was there anything else? Are we done?"

She shook her head. "No, unless you have something to add?"

He shook his head "I think I've taken up enough of your time. I don't want to be one of those people who hold you up like they think it's your job to entertain them all day."

He joked, but the humor didn't reach his eyes. No doubt, their conversation had troubled him.

Elsa couldn't keep herself from smiling at this, nonetheless. She could relate to that.

"We wouldn't want that, would we?"

Her smile was mirrored on the Chief Hiccup's scarred face.

"No, not at all."

With this, he rose from his seat, as did Elsa. They both tipped their head at each other, and then the Chief turned and marched to the door.

He spared one last look at her, and then left, the door closing behind him with a dull thud.

Elsa melted back into her chair, letting out a long breath.

It was risky, but she had done it and it had worked. It almost backfired on her several times, but she was sure now. There was no doubt in her mind, after the conversation they'd just had.

No matter what else he was, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third was the chief of the Vikings of Berk.

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A Chance Encounter, Chapter 7

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As is often the case during funerals, it was raining.

Hiccup wrapped his coat closer to his body, not minding the pouring rain. All around him, the officials of Arendelle were using portable, waterproof canopies to protect themselves from the water. Though Hiccup did not have one, he had also refused one when he was offered by a servant. He'd always felt that it was bad form to avoid the rain during funerals. That said, he'd be coming back to take one of these contraptions and see what made them tick. Later.

Ernie had led him to the chapel after Hiccup had changed into the clothes left for him by the servants. A mostly black tunic with silver trimmings and elaborate shapes in a very dark shade of blue. When it became apparent that the weather was turning bad, he was also given a finely crafted fur coat. Though Hiccup was more used to fur than the fabrics Arendelle used, this fur coat was much different than the ones back in Berk. Much more carefully made, less bulky. Made for appearance rather than stopping the cold from seeping into one's bones. Nevertheless, it did its job to a satisfying degree.

The chapel was crowded with people. At its far end was the Queen, dressed in a regal black dress and with the circlet of her station on her head. She stood next to a priest, and to the side stood the council members and three other people Hiccup did not recognize. He was led by Ernie to that side, and he stood next to those three. He was given respectful nods by the three men, each dressed in a different style, which he returned. He guessed that they were foreign dignitaries, like himself, and were stationed here due to their position.

The rest of the chapel was full of row upon row of townsfolk and guardsmen. Between the seats and the officials were three coffins, beautifully decorated with flowers and lit candles. On the front row sat what could only be the families of the fallen, dressed in borrowed black, their faces pale and drawn.

Hiccup did not believe in the God that Arendelle believed in, but he stayed silent and respectful throughout the ceremony. The priest spoke, a strange cross between a speech and a song in a language that he did not understand. Despite himself, Hiccup found his mind drifting away when the ceremony didn't seem to end anytime soon.

He was pulled from his reverie as the priest concluded his blessings. One by one members of the Queensguard that had been silently lining the walls stepped coffinside and shouldered their fallen comrades. Hiccup wondered whether this duty was an honour or a punishment as he followed the procession outside. Three graves were already dug in front of three shiny new marble headstones. Soldiers in ceremonial armor formed two lines for the procession of coffins and people to pass through, swords raised.

The coffins were balanced on wooden beams above their respective graves, at which time the priest stood behind the headstone and spoke some more. A gold-covered book in his hand, his free one moved erratically, forming shapes and gestures Hiccup had never seen before.

Eventually, the coffins were raised, the beams removed, and then the dead were slowly allowed into their graves. The crying from all around intensified. Despite the fact that he had never even seen these three, never mind knowing them, Hiccup found himself drawn by the atmosphere into a decidedly terrible mood.

With the coffins deposited gently on the earth, the people approached, each with a handful of soil. A procession formed, each saying a few soft words as they dropped the soil onto the coffins until they were almost covered. Queen Elsa approached last, going to each grave, taking some dirt in her hand and throwing it in, but not saying a word.

Once she had done this for all three, men with shovels appeared and filled the rest of the looked on morosely at the three uneven mounds of dirt. The graves were completed when marble surfaces were gently allowed to close their upper part, the walls already placed earlier. On the surface of each grave were inscribed the names, ranks and years of life for each of the the reward given to men who died for their country, for their Queen. A grand funeral yes, but ultimately, three forgotten graves.

When all this was done, the Queen stood in front of the graves, and not a soul let out a sound besides the occasional sniff or hiccup.

"I owe my life to these three." She eventually said. She spoke softly, but her voice carried easily to the whole graveyard. "If it were not for their sacrifice, I would be gone from this world. For this, they will have my eternal gratitude."

She paused, her head slowly resting to each grave, in turn.

"They were examples of what a Royal Guard should do and be. Even surprised and ambushed, they managed to take as many enemies with them and cause enough commotion to wake me up and bring more guards to the scene. The attack that caused their deaths was foiled and the mastermind behind it is being investigated. Soon, he will be brought to justice. The sacrifice of these brave men will not be in vain."

Her voice actually broke. It was only for a split second before she stopped speaking but Hiccup was standing almost right next to her and caught it. His heart went out to her. He knew how hard it was to send away people who died for you.

Oh yes, he knew.

Soon, the Queen had collected herself enough to continue. "They were the best of guards, soldiers, and people of Arendelle. Their example has much to teach all of us. I will never forget them."

She took a step back and raised her hands. Her eyes closed in concentration. Slowly, frost crept out of her palms and floated towards the marble graves. It gathered on top of each, just below the inscriptions. It slowly piled and condensed. Within a minute, every grave had a perfect ice statue on top of it, each about half a meter tall. They depicted what Hiccup could only assume were their respective dead, standing tall and proud, clad in their armor and with their swords in hand. The flawless ice was a deep blue intertwined with white, and practically shone. Suddenly Hiccup felt a warm burst of admiration for Elsa. These men had died for her and she ensured that they would not be forgotten by anyone else, either. It was a beautiful sight.

It was at this point that it'd began to rain, and everyone produced these weird personal canopies.

The people began to sing and it was beautiful; though again Hiccup did not know the words. Hiccup's eyes examined the ice statues. They were so lifelike, even their face were perfectly detailed.

Finally the ceremony seemed to end, and the people began moving away from the graveyard and the chapel.

Hiccup went with the rest of the officials, not sure what went next. His confusion must have shown on his face, because one of three men took pity on him and explained that it was customary that after the funeral itself, the people attended a sort of feast, in celebration of the life the departed had led.

Hiccup could understand that, and he thanked the man, noting that he hadn't caught his name yet. The brown haired man, who Hiccup didn't think could be much older than he was, introduced himself as a prince from the nearby kingdom of Corona. After their introduction, they didn't speak much, because everyone went into the castle and started heading towards the Ballroom.

Hiccup was embarrassed to note that he'd already forgotten the prince's weird name, besides the fact that the first sound was a 'U'.

He hadn't seen Ernie yet, so he assumed he wouldn't for the rest of the night.

The ballroom was a far cry from the last time he'd seen it, empty and dark. Now, it shone with the light of a thousand candles, and filled to the brim with round tables that took up most of the space. All the officials were seated on the table on the center, around which the other tables left a wide berth. Closest to the Queen's table were the families, followed by the nobles, and then the rest of the attendees. Servants came and went, delivering delicious food and drinks. At one end of the cavernous room, a group of musicians were playing a variety of instruments, many of which Hiccup had never before seen. The sounds they produced were smooth, gentle and melodious.

Hiccup was seated next to the weird short man with the monocle that he'd seen a few days ago who introduced himself as Andros Candelier, Minister of Finance, and the Queen, herself. Despite that, he didn't talk to the Queen at all. In fact, she had hardly sat down for more than five minutes, going from table to table and talking to her subjects, spending most of her time with the families of the fallen.

Having no particular need to talk to the monocle-wearing man besides a few cordial words of exchanged greetings, Hiccup started poking at his food and observing the others. People didn't seem to notice that he was there, exactly, and he was grateful for that, not feeling up to a questioning session right now. The mood worked in his favor, for it seemed that the others didn't feel like trying to unravel the mystery of dragon tamer right after a funeral.

The brown haired prince with the facial hair that he'd talked to earlier was having a quiet conversation with the other two dignitaries that he didn't know, on his side but across from the Queen's empty seat. The members of the council were having their own slow conversation, over a matter of a financial dispute that didn't interest Hiccup in the slightest. He saw Madam Gertrude, but she was speaking to a dignitary several seats over. He still hadn't spoken to her, and it seemed like he wouldn't tonight, either.

His eyes locked with the bald General, and they exchanged a polite

nod, before the older man turned back to his conversation and the dragon rider to his food.

Some hour later, the older of the three foreigners excused himself, citing his age as his reason for leaving relatively early. He wasn't the first one. From the tables around them, people had slowly started to rise and depart.

After Madam Gertrude excused herself, citing duties to attend to, he felt safe enough in rising, himself. He claimed that he wanted to retire a bit early, feeling somewhat under the weather. No one objected, since they'd seen that he hadn't had an umbrella before, and he managed to make his way to the doors of the room without trouble.

As he reached the door, opened by helpful servants stationed there, he felt eyes on his back. He turned, and saw the Queen looking at him directly. They locked eyes for a few seconds. She favored him with what he thought was an apologetic smile. He returned it but shook his head, before proceeding to exit the door. He didn't know if the Queen wanted him to stay or was glad to see him gone or just didn't care, but he didn't feel like staying any longer.

It had already gotten relatively late, the sun having set hours ago, during the ceremony. He decided to head directly for his quarters.

When he reached them, he found Toothless curled up next to the balcony doors, staring at the rain outside with an air of melancholy. Hiccup went to his friend, standing next to the big draconian head. He didn't say a word, just slowly rubbed and scratched the dragon, and followed his example in staring outside.

Eventually, he heard to soft snoring that proved Toothless' departure from the land of wakefulness.

Feeling pretty tired himself, Hiccup forewent a bath, knowing that he'd take one next morning and began to undress, slowly removing the still damp clothing and unlatching his prosthetic next to the bed.

He lay down, and was soon asleep. His dreams were full with the white of snow and the shine of the sun against flawless ice.

~H~

He woke up on the morning of his fourth day in Arendelle feeling refreshed. He was already up by the time Ernie popped in around seven in the morning. He showered, shaved his growing stubble, and got dressed in a light tunic in a shade of green that he particularly liked. At some point last night, his wardrobe had been filled with all sorts of clothes.

After strapping on his leg, he looked at his bags contemplatively. Making up his mind, he took his disassembled bow, his quiver and his sword and bundled them together using a long and wide piece of leather along with some straps. He hefted the bundle on his back and followed Ernie outside the room, leaving Toothless to sleep in.

The young servant raised an eyebrow at the weapons, but didn't ask

about them.

They made idle chatter along the walk to the breakfast room, but Hiccup did not fail to note that security was much higher than it had been previously, with guard presence much more frequent. Soon enough, they had reached their destination. Ernie announced him, bowed, and left him at the door.

Shaking his head, Hiccup went in. He saw the Queen and the Princess, dressed in lovely green and white dresses, already seated. But they weren't alone. With them was the black haired woman he'd seen sometimes. He knew she was a part of Queen Elsa's council, but didn't remember catching her name. Her hair was caught in an elegant bun, and she was dressed more conservatively but with equally fine fabrics.

As he moved further into the room, the Queen greeted him.

"Good morning, Chief Hiccup."

"Good morning." He responded cordially. The Princess waved at him enthusiastically, and he smiled at her.

The Queen motioned the woman next to her, who rose respectfully. "This is Elai Marina, Head Courtier and part of my inner council."

She bowed her head at him. "My Lord."

"Well met, Lady Marina. Please, sit." Yesterday's conversation was still fresh in Hiccup's mind, and he wondered if this was one of the people who doubted his word.

She did sit, and Hiccup took a seat next to Anna, who immediately latched onto his arm and started speaking, a wide smile on her face.

"Chief, Kristoff will be coming this morning! You have to meet him. You promised!"

Hiccup couldn't help but smile back at her. She was positively bursting with positive energy and it was contagious.

"I'd love to."

The Queen called out her sister's name sternly, and the Princess turned her head to look at the Queen. As soon as she caught the blonde's glare, she released Hiccup's arm and rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment.

"Sorry ..." she mumbled. Hiccup laughed, but waved her concerns away.

"I see that you're rather armed this morning." The Queen said, nodding towards the bundle that he'd deposited next to his chair.

"Yes. Ernie mentioned something about a practice range yesterday, and I was hoping to get some exercise."

"It is next to the barracks, my Lord." The lady Marina informed him. He nodded.

"Thanks. It's through the Courtyard, is it not?"

"Indeed."

After a few seconds of silence, the Queen spoke.

"Chief Hiccup, there will be a formal dinner two days from now that I would like you to attend, if at all possible. It is the next scheduled after the one you missed on your first day here. It would be a good opportunity to become acquainted with many important people, and to quell many of the rumors surrounding you."

Hiccup tipped his head. "Thank you for the advanced warning. Yes, I will be glad to attend."

Lady Marina's unflinching gaze unnerved him. He felt like he was being bisected, so he turned to the breakfast table instead.

Even on his third morning here, the food still amazed him. So rich and flavorful the likes of which he'd never tasted. Nevertheless, he minded his manners, reminded himself to use his spoon and to never use his hands for anything other than bread, and to eat slowly.

They ate in relative silence. The Queen and the Lady Marina seemed to still be affected by last night's depressing mood, and the Princess had apparently given up on conversation with them beyond generic talk of castle affairs or the weather.

When they were mostly done, the Queen addressed him, asking him what time he planned to take his flight. He asked her whether this afternoon, two hours after lunch, was okay. She nodded her head, and they agreed to meet on the Courtyard, from where he would take off.

Breakfast was soon finished, and they all rose and exited the door, leaving the servants to clean up. Hiccup hefted his bundle of weapons on his right shoulder. Ernie met them outside and bowed to the royals.

Outside, the Head Courtier bowed to each of them in turn.

"It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Chief Haddock."

"Likewise, Lady Marina."

"My Queen, Princess."

The royal sisters nodded to her, and she turned and walked away, her stride crisp and controlled.

Princess Anna turned to him, grabbed hold of his left hand and all but dragged him down the hallway.

"Come, come, he'll be here soon!"

"Anna!" Elsa admonished, but was summarily ignored by her hyperactive

sister. Hiccup looked at the Queen helplessly as he was dragged forward, and she shrugged at him. Even Ernie was fighting to repress a smile. There was no hope.

"Where are we going?" He asked.

"To your quarters."

"Why?"

"To get Toothless, of course!"

The Queen frowned at this.

"Is it wise to bring the dragon near Sven?"

"Naw, he'll be fine. Won't he, Chief?"

Hiccup was confused. "Who is Sven?"

"Kristoff's reindeer friend."

"We are meeting Kristoff and his reindeer?" He asked, incredulity coloring his voice. He looked at the Queen, who only raised a perfect eyebrow at him.

>Right, dragon rider. Gotta remember that.
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"Yes, yes. You'll love them, I know it!"

"Sven will be safe near Toothless, will he not?" The Queen asked, looking at him. Hiccup shook his head.

"Yeah. Toothless doesn't like reindeer. Last time he tried, he was removing muscles from his teeth for a week."

The Queen's completely blank expression was worth a thousand golden pieces.

She blinked. "That's ... uh ... that's good I suppose."

For the first time today, Anna showed something other than exuberance. She turned her head to look at him, uncertainty in her eyes.

"Sven will be fine, right?" Hiccup fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yes, the reindeer will be fine."

The four of them finally reached Hiccup's rooms, and opened the door to find Toothless, sans gear, swallow the remains of something or other that constituted his breakfast. His tongue peeked out to lick around his mouth, his eyes half-closed in contentment.

He noticed them and immediately bounded over to Hiccup. He laughed and accepted his friend's affectionate rubbing, scratching the dragon behind the ears in a place he knew the Night Fury loved.

Toothless noted the rest of the room's occupants who were staring at him in various degrees of wariness.

He approached Ernie, who hesitantly extended his hand. The dragon met him halfway but kept approaching, until Ernie's hand was around the dragon's head and he was rubbing against the servant's chest.

Unused to affection from a dragon, Ernie threw Hiccup a helpless look, but he only smiled and nodded. Taking the hint, Ernie started rubbing, which caused the dragon to only try and snuggle even closer.

"Don't let him lick you!" Hiccup warned.

It was already too late though. Ernie frowned down at his sleeve, now completely soaked with dragon slobber.

"Why?"

"Because it takes ages to wash that stuff out. Trust me."

A snigger from the Princess drew the dragon's attention, making him stop licking Ernie and look at the royal sisters.

Upon catching sight of Queen Elsa, his happy expression evaporated, to be replaced by half-opened mouth and a low growl from deep inside his throat. Still right next to Ernie, the dragon glared at the Queen, who, judging by her tense stance, was becoming alarmed. Ernie's hands landed on the dragon's head gently, rubbing but at the same time coaxing him on the opposite direction from the Queen.

Hiccup frowned. This wasn't supposed to happen. He approached Toothless, standing on the other side of his head than Ernie, and drew his attention by placing an open palm on his snout.

"Woah there, bud, what's this? What are you doing?"

The dragon looked at the Queen sideways and growled. He jerked his head towards her, then shook it a few times.

"I don't think the dragon likes you, Elsa." Princess Anna fake-whispered.

"No, I don't think he does." The Queen deadpanned.

Hiccup turned his frown towards them.

"I don't understand. He didn't seem to mind you a few days ago, and he generally warms up to people, not the other way around. He even agreed to be friendly with you. Did something happen between you two that I don't know about?"

The flash of understanding on the Queen's eyes would have been enough confirmation, even if the Princess hadn't gasped audibly.

The younger girl turned to her sister, but she only received a raised hand in response, halting whatever she wanted to say in its tracks.

"Nothing happened," she lied "I guess he just doesn't like me."

As if to agree with her, Toothless snorted.

Hiccup's frown deepened. He'd known that something happened, two days ago, but figured that it hadn't been a big deal. He'd even gotten the Night Fury to agree to be friendlier with the Queen, before that. What changed?

"I expect you two to be civil, okay?" He said. The Queen nodded, relaxing her stance, and the dragon huffed but stopped growling, the tension leaving his coiled muscles.

"Let's go then!" Hyperactive Princess to the rescue, bless her heart.

>They shuffled out of the room, Anna leading the way, Hiccup standing between the Queen and Toothless and Ernie following behind them.<p>

Despite her apparent apprehension about the dragon, the Queen, was close enough to Hiccup that Toothless' wings, if extended a little, would touch her. She didn't seem to mind, as the two exchanged idle chatter. Hiccup expressed how impressed he was at the Queen's display of creating ice sculptures, and she regaled him with the tale of how she started making them to develop better control over her powers, eventually doing it solely for enjoyment.

Hiccup's hand rested on Toothless' neck and was rubbing slowly, so the dragon wouldn't feel ignored.

Their procession gathered some attention from servants and passing visitors, who all bowed out of the way with muttered greetings.

Soon, they were just a hallway away from the Courtyard.

"Kristoff!" With that loud exclamation, the Princess was off, running at full speed towards a figure just turning a corner.

Hiccup looked at the Queen, who had palmed her face and was muttering to herself. The sight caused him to grin.

Turning back to the couple ahead, he saw the Princess being raised off her feet and swung around once, twice, before being set down. While the Princess was busy kissing the living daylights out of the poor bloke, Hiccup got a good look at him as they approached.

Tall, blond, and covered in leather and fur outfit that was half-covered in snow. He vaguely recalled something about his profession having to do with ice.

Behind the couple was a reindeer, one of the biggest reindeers that he had seen to date. He looked at Toothless, but the mighty dragon only looked at the reindeer for a second before snorting and resuming being bored.

The Princess had released the man, and the three of them were now coming closer to Hiccup's group.

"Chief Haddock, meet Kristoff Bjorgman, official Ice Deliverer of Arendelle!"

"Well met, master Bjorgman. How do you do?"

"I'm quite well, Lord Haddock, thank you." He replied, but his eyes were locked on the black beast on Hiccup's side. "Is this the dragon Toothless, then?"

"Indeed. Toothless, say hi." The dragon only snorted, refusing to play the games of silly humans, but it was enough for Kristoff.

"Amazing creature." Kristoff said with awe. He glanced behind him and noticed that the huge reindeer was attempting to hide behind him.

"Sven, what are you doing? Come forward."

Then, he did what had to be the weirdest thing Hiccup had seen since his arrival. He crouched until he was eye level with the animal, turned his head towards them and began speaking in a ridiculous voice.

"_But that's a dragon_!" He said. "_Dragons eat us_!" While he spoke, the reindeer was moving his head up and down, as if nodding, and opening and closing his mouth in a weird imitation of human speech.

Then Kristoff stood straight and spoke again. "Oh come on, Sven. Toothless obviously won't hurt you. He is with Chief Haddock."

He pretended to talk for the reindeer again. "_But I'm scared. Dragons are scary. You go closer, first._" A pause. "Fine! Never had you for such a scaredy cat, Sven. Will you behave for a carrot?"

Saying this, he produced a whole carrot from the folds of his clothes. The reindeer nodded and opened his mouth. Kristoff let him have the carrot, but when Sven had eaten almost all of it snatched it back.

"Share." He admonished, before taking a bite out of the remaining carrot.

Hiccup could not watch any longer, lest his eyes spontaneously combust. Instead, he leveled a despairing look at the Queen, who was looking at him and openly sniggering in amusement.

He knew better than to ask her if what he was seeing was actually happening. He didn't need any more reminders that he had a dragon as his best friend and life companion.

"Please," he begged, voice low enough for only the Queen to hear "please tell me that we don't sound like that." He pointed over his shoulder at the man, who was still arguing with himself while pretending to be arguing with the reindeer.

The Queen's face was split by a wide smile. She must be really enjoying the situation. Hiccup's hopes were dashed.

"Well, at least you only say your own lines. That gives you some extra points."

True enough.

He exchanged an incredulous look with Toothless, who looked away from the weird exchange only to snort at his rider before returning his gaze forward at the spectacle, again.

Their arguments finished, the three of them reached Hiccup and the Queen and the greetings continued. All together, they walked outside, to the Courtyard. There, the Queen excused herself, saying that she still had rounds to make around the castle.

That left Hiccup with the Princess, her beloved, and the two animal companions. Sven the reindeer still seemed to send the Night Fury fearful looks, but after sniffing him once and snorting, Toothless never again bothered with the other animal.

Hiccup and Kristoff talked, with the occasional interjection of Anna. The blond man explained what his profession entailed and why he was often gone for long periods of time, as well as the role Sven played in his business. Hiccup learned that Sven and Kristoff had been friends since childhood, and he was given a less abridged version of the events of four years earlier that lead to his relationship with the Princess than the history books offered.

It was a sobering tale. That prince from the Southern Isles had almost managed to kill both royals and successfully take over Arendelle. He was only slightly surprised to learn that Kristoff played as much a part in saving the day as the two women had. He looked dubious at the 'true love' thing, but in the end he shrugged it off. He did not know anything about magic, really, and he'd seen stranger things.

Anna and Kristoff told him a lot, and they talked for a few hours. Eventually, Kristoff had to go and the Princess decided to go with him. Hiccup promised to meet with them again, thanked them for the company, and told Kristoff how glad he was to have met him and Sven.

He waved one last time at the Princess before the couple turned a corner, finally going out of view.

He slumped against the wall, rubbing his temples and sighing with relief. He had nothing but respect for both of them, but he could only take the Princess' exuberance and Kristoff's reindeer act for so long before developing a headache.

Ernie patiently waited for him to regain his bearings, a smile playing on his lips. Hiccup would have glared at him, but decided it was not worth the effort.

Seeing as they still had some hours before lunch, Hiccup made up his mind to go the practice range.

Ernie led him through the Courtyard and into one of the side doors. It led to another open space, between the walls of courtyard and the outer walls. Several buildings served as barracks, and Hiccup observed soldiers in great numbers performing exercises, receiving lectures, or simply lounging here and there.

Because Toothless could not fit through the door, he had to jump over the low wall separating the two areas. His sudden appearance and subsequent landing from above the wall drew the attention of every single soldier in the area, who looked up in alarm. Some drew swords or aimed crossbows. Thankfully, Hiccup's entry with Ernie could not be missed, and by now everyone recognized the Viking chief.

Ernie had a few quick words with an officer, who nodded and pointed them towards the firing range. Ernie thanked him and the three of them moved from the barracks. As they walked, they were given a wide berth from the soldiers, still the center of attention. Hiccup was pleased to note that while everyone was watching him and the dragon cautiously, there was no actual aggression in their stances, merely uncertainty.

However, while he had made great strides in restraining his reactions, weapons still made Toothless antsy.

"Easy, boy." Hiccup soothed him quietly, running his hand over the dragon's neck mollifying him.

They went through another walled section, and it led into a wide area. On the far side the castle proper began, rising high and with balconies doting its side. It was mostly comprised of a firing range, with one wall lined with targets of varying sizes. In front of the targets, the entire area was clear and separated in lines, each line in front of one target, so as to give each archer a straight shot at whichever distance he desired.

The space that wasn't used in the firing lines was filled with wooden dummies, against which soldiers hacked away with wooden or actual swords. The rest of the walls were lined with weapon caches and workbenches. Several soldiers were here, too. Some were discussing in the sidelines, others were making use of the firing range, and others yet were practising their sword forms. Many were in full armor, others only pieces of and others yet simply with their tunics or regular clothes.

Besides the soldiers, there were several foreigners like himself, as well as city folk, here for their own training.

Their arrival once again drew all heads towards them. Hiccup met their gaze evenly, looking at each of them for a few seconds before proceeding. Among the firing lines, he spotted someone he knew. He raised his hand in greeting.

"Ted, greetings."

It was almost comical how every head turned towards the man. The archer seemed a little startled. He was a blond man, quite a bit older than Hiccup, and one of the soldiers he'd talked to on the trip to Arendelle. He looked warily at Toothless, but approached them nonetheless, setting his bow down on a wooden stand.

"Chief Haddock, greetings."

"How do you do, Ted?"

Ted wasn't his actual name. It was, however, what Hiccup had decided to call him after learning his name, a much longer and confusing one,

that he promptly forgot.

"Great, actually. The time off went very well with the family."

By now, Hiccup noted that everyone had returned to what they were previously doing, through some still stole glances at them once in a while.

"Ah. The daughter no longer not so subtly implying a courtship with a certain stableboy, then?"

Ted threw his head back and laughed, an easy barking sound.

"Not quite, no. Elisa seems to have focused her attention towards the inside of castle, lately."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," the man nodded, his wrinkles accented by his wide smile "she and her friends have been talking on and on about the newest addition to the castle's bachelors."

Hiccup was suddenly feeling very uncomfortable.

"Oh?"

"Yes. In fact, they've been pestering me to arrange for them to _accidentally _meet you."

Hiccup blinked, not able to stop himself from reddening slightly, and took to fiddling with the small braid on his hair in discomfort.

"Well ... um ... that's-"

Ted laughed again, and Hiccup grinned despite himself, realizing he was being foolish.

By now Toothless had confirmed that they were in no danger, and apparently decided that Hiccup's conversation was extremely boring. Instead, he went grumpily over to the side of the wall, where it was shaded, and plopped down for a nap. He drew a few odd looks from the closest soldiers, but it mostly served very well to sort of blend him into the background.

Hiccup talked with Ted, who asked Ernie to go to the Barracks and call for Gregor and Brandon, the other two men Hiccup had gotten to know during the trip.

Soon, they were joined by the other two men, both older than Hiccup but younger than Ted, who would soon be approaching retirement age for a soldier.

They got to talking, with Hiccup explaining his impressions so far, getting a few clarifications and promising to visit their respective households whenever asked.

Eventually, Brandon showed interest in the bundle of weapons on his shoulder, asking him if he'd come to train. Hiccup nodded.

"Yes. I was hoping to get some practise in, to keep my aim sharp."

He released the bundle on a wooden stand, tied the sword to his belt and assembled the bow and its cord. Upon inspecting the bow, Ted whistled.

"This is impressive woodwork."

"Made it myself." Hiccup said. He had created every single piece of equipment he carried, and was very proud of that fact.

Brandon was looking at him speculatively, fiddling with his own bow.

"How good are you?" He asked. Hiccup grinned.

"_Very_ good."

Ted and Brandon exchanged grins, and then proceeded to challenge Hiccup to a friendly contest, using a game the archers at the castle had devised.

The rules were simple. They would all begin firing at the targets from a specific line drawn on the floor, at close range. Every successful hit and they would go to the next line, a few meters behind the previous. Bullseye counted double, and one could choose to go to a line with a smaller target if he hit three bullseyes in a row or completely missed twice in a row. They could stay in the same row even if they missed twice, but the lines kept going until such a distance that it was practically impossible to hit near the center of the target, never mind the bullseye. Smaller targets increased each successful hit's worth. They would fire every thirty seconds, at a signal given to them by the referee.

Gregor, the only swordsman of their group, would judge this one.

It began well enough for all of them, none having trouble landing the shots on close range. Soon, they had reached several lines backwards and hit enough bullseyes to advance to the next target.

Hiccup's mastery over archery became apparent soon, as he was the only one consistently hitting the center of the targets. Ted was the first to get out of the contest, having been left too far behind in points. He took it in good humor, saying that he was too old for this kind of stuff and cheering the two younger men on.

Brandon was extremely accurate at close and mid range, but Hiccup had the upper hand at long range and took brutal advantage of it, scoring more bullseyes and proceeding to smaller targets before his opponent could do the same.

Eventually, Hiccup's lead in points exceeded what Brandon could realistically come back from, and he graciously accepted defeat. The two clasped hands while the soldiers who had gathered around them cheered. Hiccup assumed that good contests always gathered excitement.

"After that display," Ted, who had approached them again, said "I believe that I want to see what else the Chief can do."

This drew cheers from the people around. Hiccup raised his hands and tried to politely decline, but Brandon reminded him that he came here to practice. What better way to do that other than push himself to his limits?

"You're just saying that to see me go all out." Hiccup pointed out.

"True," the man nodded "but what I said still stands."

Hiccup decided that he actually had a point, and since everyone was pestering him he might as well get it over with.

"Alright, fine, I'll do it. What did you have in mind, then?"

"A faraway shot?" Ted ventured.

"How far?" Hiccup asked.

"How far can you shoot?" Ted fired back. Hiccup smiled.

"What's the furthest I can shoot from?"

Ted blinked for a few seconds, and when he realized that Hiccup was not kidding released a laugh, before pointing with his hand at the base of the castle wall, quite a distance away. Brandon and the others had heard the exchange. Hiccup heard some people place bets, even.

He nodded his head, gathered up his bow and quiver and walked to the spot. It was one of the furthest lines, and he'd chosen it specifically because the target was very small. Combined with the incredible distance of basically the entire practise range, it should be a great show for all involved.

If he managed it.

Shaking any such doubts from his mind, he reached his position at the base of stone wall. Thankfully, he was given a wide berth, and people had the decency to at least pretend they weren't staring at him. Toothless was snoring a few meters to his left.

He saw out of the corner of his eye a lot of people look at a spot above him. Was that supposed to be subtle? No matter.

He took his trusty wooden bow in hand and removed a single arrow from his quiver. He readied his stance, spacing his feet evenly, and looked ahead at the wooden target. He took deep breaths, tuning out everyone else around him. A few seconds later, he raised the bow and notched the arrow. He slowly pulled back, aligning with a spot slightly above a tiny bit to the side, taking account of the slight wind.

A few more breaths, some final calculations as he held the arrow back. Then, he let fly. The projectile flew for one, two seconds, before slamming with an audible thud on the wooden post.

The awed cheers from all around him confirmed it before he saw it with his own eyes; a perfect bullseye. Hiccup smiled, feeling

relieved despite himself. He'd landed more difficult shots than this in the past, but rarely to such a critical audience.

The cheers stopped, to be replaced by gasps of surprise from many of the onlookers. Hiccup frowned, and was about try to see what was going on when a bolt of white frost flew -almost as fast as an arrow- and landed solidly on his arrow, freezing it solid.

Hiccup did not need to look up to know who was on the balcony above him, or who the soldiers were looking at. He only gazed at the frozen arrow in the distance. Was that a challenge?

He could hardly refuse such a direct challenge.

Without turning or acknowledging the ice sorceress above him in any way, Hiccup withdrew two arrows from the quiver on his side. Slowly, he held his bow sideways, so that he could place both arrows amid his fingers.

The soldiers spotted what he was doing, and the cheering began with renewed vigor on the face of such a difficult attempt. Hiccup tuned them out once again. This trick approached the limits of his abilities, but nothing else would suffice.

He held both arrows on the bow, and tilted his head to take aim. He aimed the second arrow at the target right next to the one he'd shot at before. He slowed his breathing once again, emptying his head of anything besides himself, the wind and the targets.

A few seconds of concentration later, he let loose the arrows. The springing sound of the bow's string was the only thing that was heard on the practise range, as everyone else was holding their breaths.

Two seconds later, one of the arrows landed right on top of his first, now frozen one, straight on the bullseye. The other arrow found its way to the center of the target to the left, though it was slightly approaching the edge of the bullseye. Still, two perfect hits.

Hiccup straightened his posture, allowing a smile to appear on his face and his bow to fall on his side. He'd done it. His sense of hearing came back to him in a rush, and he took in the congratulatory remarks and shouts of the soldiers around him. He allowed the satisfaction of his accomplishment to flow through him, knowing that this was the result of almost five years of training.

He was about to turn and address the Queen, when two bolts of frost went over his head simultaneously. He tracked their flight, and saw them strike his arrows perfectly, freezing them over. Apparently the Queen wasn't done, because a second later his three frozen arrows burst, like crystals after being dropped, and fell to the ground in hundreds of pieces.

He blinked one, twice, gettings his thoughts in order. That made quite the statement.

Well, he was nothing if not gracious, even in defeat.

He turned and looked up. On a balcony two floors above him stood the

Queen, with the Princess and another woman he didn't know. She was smiling down at him, hand still raised and frost slowly seeping out of it.

"You always manage to upstage me, Queen Elsa." He called up to her, to the cheers of their audience who loved their Queen above all.
"Your aim is impeccable."

"As is yours." The Queen replied Hiccup wasn't sure because he was looking from below, but for a second he thought that she'd grimaced, but then it was gone in an instant. Maybe it was a trick of the light.

"You flatter me."

"Merely stating a fact." She paused to listen to something the woman on her side said, then addressed Hiccup again.

"I'll leave you boys to your fun." She said, drawing laughter from the soldiers. "But do keep in mind that it will be lunch-time soon."

"Yes, Queen Elsa."

With that, the Queen nodded, turned, and left, her light blond hair glinting in the sunlight as she did so.

Hiccup turned back towards the soldiers but Ted, Brandon and Gregor had already approached him.

"That was some amazing shooting, lad." Ted said, clapping him on the shoulder. Hiccup was glad that the older man had taken to heart that he didn't want to be treated a certain way merely because of his title.

"I can see why I lost, now." Brandon noted, scratching his bearded chin. "I never would have managed a shot like that."

"Lots and lots of practise." Hiccup observed, drawing chuckles from the men.

With the show over, everyone returned to what they were doing. Hiccup went after some more reasonable exercises, along with Ted and Brandon.

Not long after, everyone started dispersing to the Barracks mess hall for their lunch. He'd hoped to get some sword practise in, but he'd gotten carried away with archery and now it was too late.

Oh well, there's always tomorrow...

He said his goodbyes to everyone, promised to visit them again, extracted promises to show him exactly how the crossbow worked, and went to the door of the practise range after kicking Toothless awake. The lizard grumbled, but followed. Ernie was waiting by the door, sitting on a chair. He got up as soon as Hiccup came close.

"Impressive performance."

"Why thank you, Ernie."

"Lunch?"

"Lunch."

They walked side by side to the mess room that Hiccup was familiar with and left Toothless waiting outside. Hiccup was tired from the exertion, and considered going to his quarters for a refreshing bath, first, but eventually decided against it. He'd get one when he went, later, anyway.

They both ate in silence, Ernie sitting down after only one stern look from Hiccup. After they were done, they headed to his quarters, Ernie insisting on accompanying them even though Hiccup knew the way.

After Hiccup and Toothless went in, they both tended to their hygiene. Hiccup decided to indulge in a bath like the first one he'd had, and filled the tub to the brim with hot water, again experimenting with various soaps. As Hiccup soaked in the tub, Toothless licked himself clean with his tongue, a process that Hiccup found wholly disgusting and was thankful that his slobber evaporated relatively quickly, else he'd never ride the dragon again.

After he was done and clean, he saw that he still had some time until his prearranged meeting with the Queen. He sat on the desk, taking his leather-bound notebook with him. He hadn't written anything yesterday, and he had a lot of stuff to write down. He started with a brief description of the castle, followed by a simple sketch of the building. Then he proceeded to make simple but coherent sketches of the royal sisters and Ernie, and below each he described them. He continued with his general thoughts and impressions about the land so far. He was relatively certain that they couldn't decipher the Berk dialect, even if they decided to go through his stuff for some reason. His notebook should be safe.

He had lost track of time when he heard the knock on his door. He was startled, dropping the quill he was writing with. He thanked Odin that no ink was spilled on the page, and turned the notebook over. The ink wasn't dry yet, but in this way the pages wouldn't be seen.

He went to the door and opened it. To his surprise, he saw the Queen standing outside, hands clasped together and a polite smile on her face. She was wearing a different gown than earlier -when did she have the time to change clothes all the time? This was mostly white, with touches of blue here and there, and flowed gracefully on the floor behind her.

"Hello Chief Hiccup. I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Queen Elsa, greetings. No, no bother at all." He said, uncertainty coloring his voice. They hadn't agreed that she would meet him here. He turned his head back to look at the clock on his wall, and he saw that he still had a few minutes before he'd have had to go.

"Come in, please." He invited her, moving to the side. She tipped her head and walked in, surveying the room quickly and discreetly, her gaze resting on Toothless' curled form before settling on him.

"I'm early, I know." The Queen said. "But I was finished a little earlier than I expected, and I figured that I could pick you up, as they say."

She was smiling at Hiccup, and he wasn't sure what to make of that. It seemed kind of hopeful to him, but he didn't know if he could trust his reads on her quite yet.

"That's okay, but I wasn't expecting you so soon, so I'm not ready yet."

Her eyes swept from him to Toothless and back again.

"I see a dragon, and I see a rider. What's not ready?"

"Well, yes, but do you see any riding gear?"

He watched her face, and she stared blankly for a second. Then her eyes widened slightly and color rushed to her cheeks Hiccup had to force down a grin.

"Oh," she said, trying to cover her embarrassment with a fake cough "Um ... certainly. I suppose I forgot about that."

Hiccup chuckled. "Don't worry, I don't expect you to be a dragon riding expert quite yet."

She smiled at his humor and the color slowly left her cheeks, leaving the pale, almost white complexion from before.

"I'll just go put on my gear, then, and we'll be right out."

"Alright."

They stared at each other for a minute. Hiccup was growing increasingly uncomfortable and by the looks of things, so was the Queen. So what was she waiting for? She didn't expect him to get ready with her in the room, did she?

The Queen decided to break the awkward silence first. She cleared her throat, before speaking slowly.

"So ..." She drew out the word and let it hang, as if unsure of what to follow it with.

"Well, I'll be out as soon as I put on my gear. Meaning I'll have to change clothes."

Understanding lit her expression, before color was once again rushing through those pale cheeks at the realization that it was she who was holding things up.

"Oh ... change. Of course. I didn't-, I mean, I didn't think that-"

Hiccup cut her off, taking pity on her and giving her a chance to regain her bearings.

"It's okay, it's okay. No harm done. Just wait outside for a minute and me and Toothless will be ready."

She nodded gratefully, and started backing out of the room.

"Outside, yes. I'll just ... wait outside ... then."

Still backing up, she bumped into the half opened door. Cheeks flaming, she threw him another embarrassed glance before practically bolting through it.

Hiccup shook his head. He'd given up trying to understand women a long time ago.

He moved to his baggage, where he'd placed his folded outfit. He kept the tunic but removed the belt, the trousers and the shoe. He wore his own, thicker pants that fit him better, then his insulated shirt with armor pieces. He made sure the rings on his waist were working and checked every strap twice for weak spots. Satisfied, he wore his heavy boot on his right foot. The shoes of Arendelle were nice, but offered minimal protection against the cold or the wind.

He kicked Toothless, who was napping, awake and dodged the instinctive swipe of his tail. The dragon opened his eyes grumbling. Hiccup had no doubt that he was about to be pounced for interrupting the dragon's nap, but the Night Fury's irritation vanished as soon as he saw that Hiccup wore the riding gear. He immediately jumped to his feet and began letting out excited barking sounds.

"Yes bud, we're going flying." The confirmation caused the excited dragon to have a fit of happiness. He started turning on the spot, tail wagging madly as he released his laughing sounds, ear flaps fully erect. He stopped his turning only to give Hiccup a long, drawn out lick from top to bottom.

"Ew, Toothless. I've told you to stop that." He admonished, trying to shake the slobber off his outfit. The dragon wasn't listening, however, and had already moved to the saddlebags, burying his head completely inside one. He emerged, saddle and straps carefully held between his teeth, and bounded back to Hiccup, dropping the kit on his feet and yapping excitedly.

Hiccup felt a pang of guilt. The trip to Arendelle had not been very kind to Toothless, so far. While he was discovering new things and having fun, the poor Night Fury was either bored out of his mind or alarmed by the soldiers, and they couldn't even fly to fix it. Well, no longer.

He set about strapping the equipment on the dragon, which thankfully didn't take more than two minutes. After checking that everything was in place and working correctly, Hiccup nodded to himself and retrieved his helmet from the bags. He left the sword, but kept the dagger, hidden underneath an armor piece of his suit.

He opened the doors to allow Toothless exit, and they joined the Queen who had, it seemed regained her composure and had been waiting for them. She looked both of them over, taking note of their gear.

"Apologies for making you wait."

"Nonsense, it's my fault for arriving early."

They set towards the Courtyard and drew their fair share of looks along the way. Hiccup hadn't walked around in his armor since his first arrival here, and it seemed that plenty of people needed a reminder of who he truly was. The sight of the dragon with his equipment, saddle and red tailfin only added to the whole picture.

Queen Elsa glanced at the helmet held under his armpit.

"Are you expecting to fight people on your flight, Chief Hiccup?"

Hiccup shook his head. "The helmet's not for fighting. Well, not only for fighting."

"Oh? What else, then?"

"It's useful against wind burns and bugs."

The Queen's expression shifted to one of confusion.

"What do you mean, wind burns?"

"It's what happens when your skin is hit with very fast winds. It can happen during heavy storm or blizzards, though I'm not surprised that you don't have a term for it. Wind burns are, not surprisingly, pretty common for a dragon rider."

"Oh, well I suppose that makes sense."

"Quite."

Her brow furrowed in thought. After a few seconds, she spoke again.

"And the bugs?"

Hiccup grimaced.

"You don't want to know about the bugs."

Something in his face must have convinced her, because she did not ask again. Instead, she looked over at Toothless.

"Are all those straps and metals necessary?"

"Well, technically not. But out of the various saddle designs, this is the one we prefer the most."

"I see."

They had reached the doors to the Courtyard, and the two guards stationed there bowed and opened the doors wide. The Courtyard was not empty. Rather, nobles and servants were milling about, walking slowly or talking in small groups by the fountains. Everybody stopped as soon as the dragon became visible.

They walked to the center of the Courtyard, where there was plenty of empty space. Toothless was redistributing his weight, anxious to finally get in the air.

"Where will you go?" The Queen asked.

"I was thinking a few laps around the valley, just to give the townspeople something to talk about. After that, we'll probably head behind that mountain over there or a few miles into the sea, just to be out of sight."

"Why is it necessary to be out of sight?"

"Well, it's not necessary exactly, but we've been grounded for a long time and we'll want to cut loose, you know? I don't think it wise to show these kind of tricks to people unused to the idea of dragon riders."

The 'that includes you' went unsaid. She nodded her head.

"Alright. And when will you be back?"

"Around dusk, I believe."

"I'll see if I can be here. If not, I'll order the Courtyard emptied."

"Thank you, Queen Elsa."

Toothless bumped his head into his back and wailed impatiently, which effectively ended their conversation. Hiccup offered the Queen one last smile before placing the helmet over his head. Surprisingly, the Queen's face twitched and she took an involuntary step back. What was with that?

He was acutely aware that he had the attention of dozens of eyes from all around him as he deftly climbed on Toothless and settled on the saddle, clicking the protective straps on the saddle rings. There were no reigns; Toothless was no horse. Hiccup grabbed the handholds he'd made on the front of the leather saddle. His prosthetic took its place with a soft click, and he tested the functionality of the contraption by extending the fake tailfin this way and that, to avoid mid-air surprises. All standard procedure and Toothless knew it, but he was still shaking impatiently, muscles coiled and ready to spring.

Finally satisfied that everything was in working order, he clicked the tailfin into its starting position, so that it mirrored Toothless' own, and spared the Queen one last look. He could not contain his excitement, and though she could not see it from under his helmet, he was grinning widely. Knowing that it was almost time, the Night Fury slowly extended his wings.

"Stand back, milady" He couldn't help the slight feeling of satisfaction and the equally slight smirk, as Elsa's eyes widened.

"Toothless!" He called, and the dragon sprang. He'd folded himself lower, like a cat ready to pounce, wings fully extended. At Hiccup's

order, the dragon leaped, every hat in the courtyard was sent flying as Toothless shot twenty feet straight up.

One moment they were coiled on the ground of the Courtyard, the next they'd almost reached the top of the Queen's tower already. Hiccup was just as excited as Toothless, and the sound of his loud laughter echoed between the walls of the Courtyard and the castle itself as they rocketed upwards. Toothless' let out low happy barks, flapping his wings faster and faster, his limbs following the movement unconsciously.

It was a beautiful day, and they flew as high up as the clouds, before suddenly stopping their ascent and letting themselves fall backwards, entering a controlled freefall, enjoying the feeling of the wind rushing through.

They leveled above the castle, and Hiccup directed Toothless in a fast glide around the main towers of the castle, within the perimeter of the castle walls. On the second lap around the towers, he spotted the tiny form of the Queen, still on the Courtyard along with everybody else. He waved excitedly as they passed. He noticed the scores of people watching them, but paid them no mind.

Toothless led them over the fjord and they dipped low. Low enough that Hiccup could see his reflection if leaned to the side, and Toothless could sink the edge of his claws in the water. They flew over the water's surface, relishing the feeling of freedom that flying always induced. They started climbing again, up and away from the castle, towards the open sea. There, they could indulge in some of their more risky and jerky stunts that would probably scare any onlookers.

When Hiccup had deemed them far away, they began. Simple things at first, such as sudden changes in altitude or weaving between clouds. Warmup done, they escalated to continues barrel rolls, freefalls, flying incredibly high or incredibly low, and to top off the evening Hiccup jumped off of Toothless' back and they both fell side by side, until he once again grabbed hold of the saddle and seated himself.

Before they knew it, hours had passed and the sun was dipping below the horizon.

"Come on bud, let's go back." Hiccup instructed, and the Night Fury complied without a lot of arguments. They were both satisfied but tired. They flew slowly on the way back, simply enjoying the feeling, each other's company, and the sunset to their left.

They arrived back at the castle. As they were flying more slowly this time, Hiccup took some time examining it from above. It was quite impressive, and the city of Arendelle expanded around it. His estimations had been correct, it really wasn't bigger than Berk. Still, it made for quite the lovely view.

Circling the castle as they were, Hiccup noticed the scores of guards lining the walls and patrolling all over the place. Understandable, he supposed, in the wake of an attempt on the Queen's life, but then ... where those war machines on the turrets? He didn't recognize them, but their function was obvious. They weren't trained on him and Toothless currently, but he didn't doubt that they'd be hard-pressed

to evade them all if they had to. And he didn't remember seeing war machines on the walls when he arrived here. Where these, too, new security additions in the wake of the attack? Or were they a failsafe against him and Toothless?

He determined to think on this later, not wanting to spoil the mood of the first flight after nearly five days. They circled the castle once again, gliding lower and lower, until Hiccup changed the tailfin's position again and Toothless responded, swiftly diving the rest of the way down to the Courtyard's floor. He leveled a couple meters above the ground touched down lightly.

There were still a lot of people around, some of them not even trying to hide the fact that they were waiting for him. Hiccup paid them no mind. They'd get used to it.

He lightly hopped off the saddle after releasing his prosthetic, and rubbed his friend's long neck.

"That was awesome, bud."

Toothless purred from low in his throat, obviously satisfied with the whole endeavor and agreeing with him.

Hiccup heard her voice from behind him.

"Quite the performance."

He turned, a smile on his face. The Queen was standing with the Princess and Ernie. Though not matching the younger girl's beaming smile, the Queen's expression was pleasant. Or it had been, for as soon as Hiccup turned to look at her she flinched, before composing herself again on a mask of neutrality.

Hiccup wondered about this. What had caused it? Was it the helmet? He reached up and removed the helmet, mechanically running his gloved fingers through his long hair to straighten them somewhat. It must have been the helmet, for in its absence the Queen seemed to relax a bit.

What was wrong with his helmet?

"Pssh, that was nothing." Hiccup waved her off. "Simple gliding and turns. That's just the tip of the proverbial iceberg."

"Still more than anyone else around here has seen, so it was plenty impressive." Princess Anna replied.

"I guess so."

"You must be tired, are you not?"

"Kind of, yes. I'm thinking of going to my quarters and then for dinner."

"We won't keep you then." The Queen said. "It is getting rather late. You remember the banquet I invited you to?"

Hiccup's brow furrowed a little at the unknown word. However, there was only one thing the Queen had invited him to, and it was the feast

two days from now. So, he simply nodded. Glancing at Toothless, he saw the dragon cleaning its paws, not caring about them in the slightest.

"Yes, I remember. I won't miss it."

"Good, good. Then we'll let you retire."

"But I have so many questions!" The Princess cut in, a slight whine edging itself into her voice. Hiccup grinned despite himself. It was impossible not to like the exuberant girl.

"Chief Hiccup is tired, and I won't have you pester him now." The Queen scolded her sister, as if to a child. The Princess' face fell, and she mumbled a grudging agreement. Hiccup's smile widened. This was gold. Solid gold.

"Tomorrow, perhaps?" He offered, and received nods. They exchanged pleasantries and separated, the royal sisters heading inside and to the right, while Ernie, Hiccup and Toothless went left. Hiccup chatted with Ernie on the way, asking him about this or that landmark that he'd spotted while airborn, and Ernie asked about pieces of Toothless' harness that he couldn't figure out what they were for.

When they reached his quarters and not two seconds after being divested of his harness, Toothless scratched on the balcony door and crooned at Hiccup until he opened it. Then the Night Fury plopped himself on the balcony and proceeded to nap. Ernie opened a book while waiting for Hiccup to bathe and dress into something more casual than his armor. When the viking had done so, so the two of them headed out, leaving Toothless to his rest.

Dinner was a quiet affair for both of them, Ernie knowing him well enough by now that he knew he preferred comfortable silence to forced conversation. By the end of the meal Hiccup was sated of his hunger but he was just beginning to feel the deep fatigue of a full, active day. His limbs felt sluggish, and his mind even more so.

Ernie followed him until his quarters, at which point he bowed and bid him goodnight. Hiccup did bathe, though he resisted the urge to fill the tub and just melt in it, because he'd much rather avoid falling asleep accidentally. Toothless had eaten while he was at dinner, and the dragon was now out like a light, sprawled on the balcony. Apparently, it was his new sleeping quarters.

Wrapped in a warm robe, courtesy of Ernie, he sat heavily at the desk. He still had some energy left, and he wanted to record his experiences in his notebook and complete his earlier writings. He added a few rough sketches of Arendelle from above. He didn't keep it up for long. He finished writing and prepared for bed.

There was still a lot to be done in the days to come.

~H~

* * *

><p>Notes:

** i)** I swear to god, the wordcount of these chapters just reproduces by itself and I'm left with half a chapter that already exceeds 10k words and then I'm forced to split it up, even though it is the already split second part of the previous chapter, so technically it's one fourth of the original. I fail at estimating wordcounts for anything, basically.

ii) Thank you to everyone who read and reviewed. I read and appreciate every single one, and they're very helpful and motivational. However, there is something I want to say. I have a very clear plan for the story and I follow it diligently. I appreciate your reviews, but if I write something that one of you happened to suggest in a previous chapter's review, in no way does this mean that I got my inspiration from you. Sorry, but if I waited for reviews to write my story I would be pretty pathetic.

**iii) **The full trailer for HTTYD 2 has been released, as well as the first 5 minutes of it. My views on it are mixed. I like a lot of the concepts, but I absolutely hate Hiccup's mother, and I'm pretty sure the second movie will not fit perfectly with what I have planned. Expect to see some, but not all, of HTTYD 2 absorbed into my story. You can be certain that the mother will not be one of them.

For tl;dr's sake, my fic has been canon only until the end of the first HTTYD movie, not the second, though I retain the right to integrate whatever parts of it I see fit.

iv) Each of you must sacrifice their pet cats to the lady Sorrows, AKA Yes Miss Lady. If you don't own a pet cat, buy one. Then sacrifice it.

** v) **I am not a history buff. I am not an anthropologist, an archeologist, a historian, or a combination of the above. I will do cursory research on topics of interest, but the focus of this fic is not historical accuracy. If that is what you want, go read 'Here Be Dragons' over at the HTTYD fandom, by Dyanne Hellen Sotobod. She writes better than I ever could.

vi) I don't believe in cliffhangers. I think they're a cheap device that says more about the author than about the story.

8. Elsa 4

Disclaimer: Standard disclaimer.

Notes: Plenty of notes again. Let's get to it.

a) Stop asking me if I have abandoned this. I have not. None of my active stories are abandoned. If I were to abandon something, I would post a note notifying the readers as such before taking the story down altogether. So no, long waits between updates don't mean that this is forgotten or scrapped. In fact, any update within less than six months is considered fast, in certain circles. Beware the stories that update every few days, for they tend to either be terrible, or burn out quickly and end up, sooner or later, abandoned. An exception to this rule are stories that are already completed, and the author decided to just be a review-whore about it and post the story in segments every few days. That's cool.

b) Having said that, almost two months between updates is much different than my previous update waits for this story, so some confusion is expected. To compensate you, my dear readers, this chapter touches 25k words (without the A/Ns). Remember how I keep mentioning that I have no way of estimating wordcounts accurately and end up splitting the chapters? I still failed at estimating the count, but decided not to split the chapter in two or maybe even three parts, as I normally would have done. Just so you guys can see what I usually have to deal with.

c) I noticed a distinct lack of sacrificed cats to the Lady Sorrows. This is unacceptable. Her fabulous red hair will reach through your screen and strangle you if you do not sacrifice your cats, heathens.

(Disclaimer: No, her hair will not reach through your screen to strangle you. It is, however, fabulous)

d) I have noticed quite the high amount of anonymous reviewers. I can't reply to you guys, but know that I read and appreciate your reviews. Thank you.

e) No, I have yet to see HTTYD2. For the purposes of this story, HTTYD2 is not considered canon. My apologies, but I had already mapped out this story completely before the second movie came out, thus cannot alter its course now. If this ruins the deal for someone, I hope you find something more to your tastes.

f) It was brought to my attention that I know nothing about archery and that it showed on the previous chapter. To any and all archery enthusiasts who may have read the previous chapter and cringed, my sincere apologies.

g) I want to hear you guys _OHSNAP_!

* * *

><p>~E~
A Chance Encounter, Chapter 8
>~E~

* * *

><p>For the first time in a long while, Elsa woke slowly. Unlike most mornings, the worries of the nation did not immediately line up to assault her as she lay sunken into her pillows, blearily prying open her eyes. She savored it for a moment, perfectly comfortable and thinking of nothing more than the unpleasant drafty walk to the bathroom. Finally, she released a massive yawn that was quite unbecoming of a queen and rolled out of bed to stumble towards the bathroom. The cold water woke her, even as the sun peeked its way over the mountains. After she dried herself, her ladies in waiting fitted her into a stylish purple dress and gently guided her to a chair to work on her hair.<p>

She leant back into the chair, relaxing into the rituals that started her every day.

She frowned darkly when she remembered the state she had been in the morning of the attack. Almost murdered or not, to be seen by subjects

and guests running around in a hastily put-on dress, her hair a sight, was not becoming of a normal gentlewoman, never mind a queen. It made her look weak, unprepared, an object to be protected rather than a powerful sorceress to be respected. The fact that she had been seen by the resident Viking had been simply icing on the proverbial cake.

Well, there was no use fretting over it now. All she could do was make sure that she was perfectly groomed from now on, so that not even the memory would remain.

Before she knew it, it was time for breakfast. She was almost surprised that it wasn't necessary for her to get up earlier to work. Maybe things were getting calmer.

She walked to breakfast alone. Despite her worries, she found that she was in a strangely buoyant mood, a smile on her face and a spring in her step. She supposed that there was nothing like someone trying to kill you to make you appreciate the mornings.

Entering their semi-private breakfast room, she found it already occupied. Seated next to each other were her sister and Chief Haddock, and opposite them were her Head Courtier and her Minister of Finance. Ernie stood unobtrusively in a corner, his usual neutral expression shifting to a welcoming smile as she walked in. Everyone rose as she entered and offered her morning greetings.

She seated herself and breakfast resumed in earnest. Anna was firing questions at the Viking Chief as rapidly as even her strained sense of propriety allowed, to which the young man did his best to answer. Elsa left them to it, opting to engage in small-talk with her two Council Members.

Soon she was done, and rose to leave when everyone was almost finished. Her two council members followed as she said goodbye to Anna and Chief Haddock. Anna had apparently convinced the Chief to let her give him a more personal tour of all her favorite places in the castle, Ernie would trail discreetly behind them, for propriety's sake.

She wished the Chief a good day, but could spare no more time on him, as the day's work was upon her. She started her rounds of the castle after briefly discussing with the council members, visiting nearly every part of it to personally check that everything was flowing smoothly after the recent troubles. It was important to be seen as in control and not cowered by the recent attempt on her life. She got engaged in this and that, solving matters that popped up on occasion, but mostly fielding concerned questions and providing reassurance to the people who managed her castle and her kingdom.

After her rounds she settled down in her office and began the more boring part of her day: paperwork first, private audiences second. Arendelle, despite its small size, had a lot of matters of finance and disputes of all kinds and sizes that tradition dictated she resolve personally. It was there that she accepted guests that did not choose to approach her in Court, as well.

Before she knew it, it was noon and she looking up from another report and wondering where several hours went.

There was a polite knock on her study door, and the voice of a guard, announced her Commander General. Shad Mertok was dressed as immaculately as ever in his crisp military suit. He entered, walked up to her desk and bowed at the waist.

"My Queen."

"At ease, General." She said, putting down her pen, "I usually go weeks without seeing you, but I'm getting so many visits from you these days. Reminds of that time when I was fourteen. You had to sleep in the room adjacent to mine for weeks at a time so that you'd be nearby when I was troubled."

A tiny smile cracked the general's professional facade. "Aye, my Queen, I remember. Your powers did not take to puberty well and your parents, god rest their souls, were away. I had to do something, seeing as you were driving our poor staff mad."

She smiled fondly at the memory, "Even now you have the power to calm me down with naught but a few words. One day you'll have to tell me how. I wish I had your power over others."

"You need no power, my Queen. Your people love you. Besides, what is an old dog without his tricks? Take those away from me, and I'll be totally obsolete."

"Never while I'm Queen, General."

"Heh. We all get old eventually, my Queen." Mertok replied mirthfully, his many wrinkles rearranging into a rare smile.

"As good as this reminiscing has been, I assume you didn't come here just for that."

The smile disappeared and he nodded, the stern expression returning to his face.

"Indeed. There has been news."

Elsa sobered up as well. That could only mean one thing.

"You found the mole?"

He seemed to hesitate for a second "Potentially."

"That's pretty fast, even for you."

"We had a lucky break. He was discovered sneaking some information into the Grandlandian entourage that was leaving yesterday."

Elsa frowned. "The Grandlandians were in on this? And you let them go?"

"There was no evidence as to their association with the perpetrators or the mole. They could have been simply used as a carrier. Holding them without basis could have had catastrophic consequences."

"I see. What did you learn?"

"He was a guard, serving for two years now. The background he

supplied to obtain the position appears to be false. He had some minor access to the patrol schedules."

"Was it him, then? Is the case closed?"

Mertok frowned, "I would like to reassure you that this is over my Queen, but the one behind this attack is likely still out there. In my professional opinion, this man is a pawn, caught through blind luck. He has only superficial knowledge of the patrol schedules needed to make it to your chamber unseen."

"So what? We caught an underling?"

"A simplification, perhaps, but essentially true. This attack was meticulously planned; whoever coordinated it did so with incredible diligence, patience and attention to detail. Somebody spent a lot of time and a lot of money to get those men into your bedchamber." The general said, rubbing his beard.

"This man could theoretically have manufactured such a route, but success would require a lot of luck and guesswork. Whoever the mastermind behind the attack was, it seems unlikely they would have left such things to chance."

"You almost sound like you admire whoever it is."

He frowned. "I respect the strengths of my allies and enemies alike. To do otherwise would be foolish."

She took his point graciously. "If there are others we must get him to tell us."

"He's not speaking."

"How hard are you trying to convince him?"

The General looked at her gravely, "How hard should I be trying?"

Elsa didn't reply immediately, she understood the implications of his question. There was a well-stocked dungeon under her castle for such occasions, built by her ancestors in more tumultuous times. Before now she had never had the necessity or the wish to use its more persuasive charms.

"Hard enough for results, but no actual wounds, and definitely nothing permanent," She paused thoughtfully "throw him in the Red Room for an hour or two, a closer look at the more imaginative instruments in there may put him in a more talkative mood."

Mertok nodded, mouth set in a grim line. Elsa knew that he enjoyed his duty even less than she did hers, but he had served many years for her father even before she was born. He had followed her father's ascension to the throne as he himself rose in the military ranks, being a few years older than the Ellesmyre heir. One did not rise to control a kingdom's military by shying away from the uglier aspects of the military and of war.

"I will see to it personally, my Queen."

She almost dismissed the half-formed thoughts knocking on the back of her mind; General Shad's dedication to this investigation was commendable and characteristic of his formidable and meticulous nature. But it also meant that all the information reported to her came directly through him. He was the best, dedicated, reliable, and with a reputation above reproach. But in the back of her mind that childhood part of her, honed by loneliness and control, sat up and made a small note.

"Anything else of importance?"

"Well, there is one thing."

"Out with it, General."

"It has to do with Chief Haddock."

Elsa sighed, rubbing her eyes. Why did that man always seem to cause her headaches?

"Of course it has. What is it this time? Do you have some new reservations about our resident Viking?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"Then what is this about?"

"It has to do with his display with the dragon. It was most impressive."

"Indeed." She prompted, waiting to see where he was going with this.

The General hesitated, appearing to choose his next words diplomatically. "The problem is, we are not the only ones who know. You can be certain that rumors of the dragon will spread like wildfire to all the neighboring kingdoms within the week, and even further within the month."

"I assumed that had already happened, what with his very public entrance into the city."

"Considering that everyone thinks dragons are extinct, I would imagine initial reports were met with some skepticism, my Queen. But the Chief's evening 'exercise' is very public, soon those reports are going to start to be taken seriously. You can be certain that Chief Haddock and his pet dragon will garner a lot of interest among our neighbors."

Elsa's brow furrowed.

"I can see how that would be something to keep in mind, but there is nothing immediate that we can do, is there?"

The General didn't respond immediately, as if gathering his thoughts.

"It would be in our best interests to get Chief Haddock as close to Arendelle as we can. The existence of dragons was bad enough, but his display in the courtyard nicely demonstrated the fact that they

can apparently be tamed and weaponized. A game changer for any army, it will not be overlooked by anyone."

"So now you believe him, do you?"

"I never doubted his ability to tame a dragon. In this instance that is more valuable than the legitimacy of his status as chief of some far away island tribe."

"That is a fair point, so what is it you propose?"

"He seems to trust you. It would be prudent to inquire about the nature of dragon taming, and dragons themselves."

Elsa frowned "You want him to â€œ teach us how to ride dragons?"

"That would be an ideal scenario, but any information is better than the fat load of nothing we're sitting on right now."

"Why is this relevant? There are no dragons in Arendelle or anywhere nearby."

"That we know of." Mertok noted. "Perhaps there are and we don't know enough to find them. Perhaps there are lands where they are as numerous as mice or mosquitoes. Regardless, any military with dragons incorporated would be unstoppable. I'd rather that be us and our allies than our enemies."

"For all we know, Toothless is the only dragon remaining."

"That seems rather farfetched, I think. Did the Chief say that?"

Elsa frowned again, trying to remember his exact words.

"He said Toothless is the only one he's ever seen when I asked him if there are more dragons. He called it a â€œ What was it? Oh, yes, "a Night Fury_. I did not push him further, for I assumed that Night Fury was simply a cultural name for a dragon, as it does fit the form of the beasts. It is possible he was stepping around the truth, or that Night Furies are the only tamable dragons, or that they are so rare that he has truly only seen one dragonâ€œ "

"We do not know enough to assume anything, at this point. This is why it is imperative that we learn more. Night Fury could be a classification."

"I see." And Elsa did see. The implications were many, and far-reaching. She'd have to think harder on this.

"I will keep your words in mind, General."

Mertok nodded curtly, but was silent.

"If that is all you have to report?"

"It is."

"Good. Keep me updated." She rose, settling the remaining paper work

on her desk, she walked towards the door.

"Where are you going, my Queen?"

"Taking a break. I've had enough of this until court hours."

The General nodded his head and waited as Elsa took the lead, exiting the office. They said their goodbyes outside the door and parted ways.

Elsa sighed, trying to rid her mind of unpleasant memories and intrusive thoughts. Light entered through the windows, gentle and soft. It was a great day outside. In the distance, Elsa could see the Northern Mountain, covered in snow. That sudden, momentary glint could, with some imagination, have come from her castle of ice, still intact and patiently waiting for its Queen. On frantic days like this she missed its promise of perfect solitude and absolute freedom with a fierce longing. The cold, fractal beauty of its long halls, and those few heady days when it had felt like her blossoming powers could fix all of her problems. She placed a hand on the warm stone of her castle's window ledge. Her place was here, but deep within the recesses of her mind, she was glad that that place was still there. It stood as a reminder that if she wanted, she could go, leave; nobody could stop her. It helped on the days where all the responsibilities piled up and she felt like bolting. Knowing that one could, if she so wished, run away, infinitely helped combat the urge to do exactly that.

Her moody ruminating thoroughly over with, she set off to a stroll around the castle. Even though she'd literally spent her entire life here, she still loved the ancient Ellesmyrian seat of power. Roaming its halls still fascinated and calmed her, particularly since she had avoided doing that for so many years, hiding away in her room.

High as she was in her tower, it took a while for her to reach the lower floors. She was in no hurry, greeting passing servants or guests with a smile and a kind word. The only visiting royal may have been the Viking chief, but the castle had numerous visitors at all times, from foreign dignitaries to merchants to aristocratic families to artists, and a slew of other people with whom Arendelle shared interests.

Speaking of Chief Haddock, she suddenly wondered if he'd escaped her sister's clutches or if he was still being dragged around her castle. She loved her sister dearly and would do anything for her, but she had borne the brunt of her enthusiasm enough times to know that it should be received in small doses. Right now, Chief Haddock seemed to be received much more attention than someone with little prior experience with the Princess should rightly be subjected to.

Finally reaching the lower floors, she decided to go outside. The castle's gardens were breathtakingly lovely this time of year. Once, they had been the personal domain of her mother, who had spent a good part of her time on the gardens, taking personal care of everything. While she couldn't afford to spend as much time here, she'd made sure they received the best care on a daily basis.

The gardens were beautiful today as well. They covered a sizable chunk of the castle grounds and were surprisingly large for being walled around. The cobbled paths, the ancient trees and flamboyant

flowers always lifted her spirits and brought a smile to her face.

A black, alien shape drew her attention; a little way off the path was a wide glen, bathed in sunlight. Lounging amongst the grass and the wildflowers, she spotted the dark form of the Dragon, Toothless.

The dragon was lying without his harness on the soft grass, legs curled under him like a cat and wings folded along his sides. His tail was swishing slowly from side to side, mirroring the slow sway of his head. He was holding what looked like a small branch with his teeth.

Almost unconsciously, she started heading towards him. If the dragon was here, so was Chief Haddock. She would not ask him about dragons, not yet, for the topic should be approached under the right conditions if she was to persuade him to give her such tactically advantageous knowledge. But perhaps the right opportunity would present itself, soon.

As she slowly approached, she saw that the dragon had in front of him a long, wooden tray-like contraption that was filled with some kind of dirt or sand. The dragon was using the branch held in his jaws to form shapes in the dirt.

When she was but a few meters away from him, the dragon's head turned ever so slightly and one giant green eye zeroed in on her. She was unable to help herself and she froze like the prey she suddenly acutely felt like. It looked at her for a second and its nostrils flared once, but then it returned to whatever it is it was doing, not sparing her a second glance. She shook off the momentary fear; feeling rather annoyed with herself, and considered it safe to approach again.

She looked this way and that, trying to spot him, and walked around the dragon, mindful of its swishing tail. There, she saw the Chief. He was lying down on the grass, the notebook open but set downwards on his chest, the quill dangling loosely from his mouth like a forgotten pipe. His hands were behind his head and he seemed to be napping, as his eyes were closed. She didn't see Ernie anywhere, but that didn't mean anything at the moment.

She walked, slowly as she could so as not to startle him, until she stood only a meter away from his resting head.

"Chief Hiccup?"

"Hmmm?" His eyes slowly opened and he squinted up at her, somewhat blinded by the glare of the sun. He recognized her, but made no effort to move. "Oh, hello there, Queen Elsa."

"Greetings." She returned. "I see you're enjoying a nap after having escaped my dear sister's clutches."

"Nap? No, just resting my eyes for a bit. And A-, Princess Anna is not so bad. She is excitable, yes, but you cannot help but marvel before her unshakable cheer. It is ... quite refreshing."

Well, that was a pretty good way of describing her sister. Not that Elsa had missed the way he corrected himself when speaking of Anna.

Were they on first name basis, already? Typical Anna.

"I see. Then what is it you're doing?"

"Well, Toothless and I are drawing." As he said this, he rose to a sitting position and turned the open notebook open pages-upwards. She couldn't see what it was from her position without indiscreetly craning her neck.

"Drawing?"

"Indeed." Then he turned his head to look at his dragon companion.
"We're drawing, aren't we bud?"

The dragon warbled excitably around his stick, and Elsa finally took the time to look at the tray of what she now recognized as wet sand. The dragon had drawn lines this way and that. They formed no discernable shape, but it didn't seem to phase the dragon as he continued to drag his wooden stick through the sand.

"Does it actually mean something?"

"What does?"

"The shapes he's making. Are they a representation of a hunting route, maybe? Perhaps the twisting paths of a great cave?"

Looking back at the Chief, she saw him look at her with an expression she'd seen on his face once before.

"Or, perhaps â€¢ not?" She said, somewhat embarrassed.

"Toothless doesn't have the attention span or the motor controls on his jaw to make representative illustrations such as hunting routes, nor does he have a set path that he follows every day. Dragons don't think like humans. Not to mention, they don't understand the concept of abstract visual representations that is needed for art or written language." The Chief said, "But he likes to join in."

Elsa nodded in understanding "It is strange," she said "He is so obviously intelligent, far beyond that of any regular beast, and yet the structure of his mind is so very alien to our own."

Hiccup nodded gravely "I have spent more time with Toothless than any single person over the last few years, I know him better than I know any other living soul. And yet sometimes events remind me that even I do not fully understand how his mind truly works."

Chief Hiccup rose to his feet and walked up to the dragon's head, looking down on his friend's creation. Toothless saw him and looked up at him, then down at the sand, then up again, and then back down, obviously waiting for a comment and, judging by the widening of the dragon's grinning mouth, expecting a positive one.

"It's great bud, really good, keep going!" Elsa noted with amusement that he hadn't even attempted to venture a guess as to what 'it' was. It seemed to be enough for the dragon, however, because he returned to swishing his stick with enthusiasm.

"He likes to mimic what I'm doing. Even did it the first time we met.

He likes to receive praise even more."

"And what is it you're drawing, Chief Hiccup?"

The Viking brought the open notebook up to his chest protectively and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Oh this? Nothing of importance."

Was that embarrassment she caught in his tone? It must have been something juicy.

"I'd like to see it, nonetheless."

"It's not finished. I'll show you when it's done, but I'd like to finish it first if, that's okay. Here, look at this, instead."

He turned a page and offered her the notebook. She took it in her hands gingerly, throwing a wary look at the dragon as she did so; aware of what had happened the last time she'd taken it. If he noticed, the reptile didn't seem to care.

For a second, she was tempted to just turn the page, ignoring the Chief's wishes, but that would have been completely rude and unbecoming of her. Instead, she focused on the drawing in front of her. It was made with charcoal again, surprisingly, and depicted Toothless, splayed on his back under the shade of one of the prettier trees in the Gardens. She recognized it by its shape, and thought it a shame that the Chief could not have added the light pink color of its leaves. Still, it was a beautiful composition. The view of the dragon splayed out playfully, limbs this way and that like an overgrown cat, was surprisingly gentle and cute for such a dangerous creature.

"It is a very beautiful sketch." She noted.

"Thanks. I do what I can." He accepted back the notebook from her hands and closed it. "By the way, I started work on your map today."

Elsa peered at him curiously. "Oh?"

"Indeed. I have bad news though."

"Do tell."

"I've drawn maps before, but never one this big or this extensive. I'm afraid I had quite underestimated the effort required. It will take twice as long as I had anticipated, at least."

Elsa waved a hand dismissively. "That is quite alright. You have all the time you need."

The Chief tipped his head at her. "My thanks."

"There is no need for such."

"Just accept them, would you?" He said, a hint of playfulness in his voice. A small smile graced Elsa's lips.

"If you insist."

The Chief snorted in good humor, which drew another small smile from Elsa. Then, she folded her skirts and sat down on the cool grass. Hiccup looked slightly thrown at her break in palace etiquette, and then smiled and flopped down nearby. She idly picked a few wildflowers, and cast around for another topic.

"I heard you had a discussion with my Head Supervisor."

"Madam Gertrude? Yes I did, a very pleasant woman."

"Truly?" She did not mean for the surprise in her tone, for she knew Gertrude to be a good woman and a efficient supervisor, but her formal ways tended to leave a cold impression on strangers. The Chief looked at her sideways, as if not understanding her tone.

"Yes. We had a very pleasant discussion about the castle, her duties and the various residents. She invited me for tea in a few days."

"Madam Gertrude is a good person. I am glad you got a chance to get to know her."

The Chief nodded. "She also told me a bit about the feast that I missed. The way she spoke of it made me regret not attending."

"She does have a way with words. She was not exaggerating, however. Thankfully, you'll have your chance tomorrow, and any time after that."

"And I am looking forward to it."

"I will arrange something suitable made for you to wear on the opening dance, in case you were worried about it."

Chief Hiccup's brow furrowed comically. "Wait, opening dance?"

Elsa blinked in confusion. "Well, yes. As the only other royal in attendance, custom dictates we open the dance."

"You want me to dance? With you?" He asked, disbelief in his voice. Elsa was getting more confused. What was the matter?

"It is customary." She repeated, thrown a little. She considered that maybe he had reservations due to his prosthetic, but dismissed the thought immediately. There were no signs that the otherwise crippling injury had any effect on the Viking. His walking was and his stances were perfectly normal, and one would not know he even had a prosthetic if he'd chosen to cover it. So it couldn't be that.

"But—" he began almost frantically as his left hand raked through his messy hair "you're the Queen. Couldn't you change it to have someone else open the dance? Or dance with someone else?"

Elsa frowned, not sure if she should be insulted or not. Did he find the prospect of dancing with her so distasteful? Her smile slipped off her face. Despite herself, she recognized what she was feeling as traces of hurt. Though it was probably to her pride, she reminded herself. She was after all a young unmarried Queen; there were few

men who would reject such an offer.

"If the idea displeases you, I will arrange for a different partner for you."

Her tone must have been colder than she had meant it to be, or he must have seen something in her expression, because he immediately started speaking again.

"It's not that I don't want to dance with you. Really, it's not. I just... I've never been much of a dancer. I have no idea how the dances around here go, and ever since I got this," he pointed at his prosthetic "any sort of graceful movement has gotten worse than my already terrible aptitude for it."

Elsa frowned again, but was mollified. He was worried not about dancing with her, but about not knowing the steps. The thought relieved her, though she was not sure why. She inwardly frowned at herself. That feeling would need to be isolated and examined.

She kept her frown, though for different reasons. She did lie earlier, and he himself had been right. She was the Queen, and could change the banquet in however many ways she saw fit. Such a small change wouldn't even draw more than a few raised eyebrows and maybe a few comments.

But still, she didn't want to do that. Seeing the usually unflappable Chief uncomfortable and getting to dance with him was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"The steps will be easy." She said at last. "I will arrange for two sessions, one tonight and one tomorrow, to teach them to you. They should be easy to pick up. I will limit the repertoire."

He raised an eyebrow. "And you're sure two sessions will be enough for me to learn to dance like your people do? As I have said, I'm not the most graceful of people."

Elsa frowned, not understanding what he was saying. Was it false modesty? Was he fishing for compliments? He didn't seem like the type.

"You do battle more gracefully than most people walk, Chief Hiccup. I saw that firsthand when you beat me."

His brow furrowed. "I really don't think that counts, Queen Elsa."

Elsa scowled. "There is no need to rub your victory over me in, Chief Hiccup. I would think that you have nothing else to prove."

He seemed taken aback by her tone, which she couldn't help but scoff at. What did he expect, after making light of their very nearly deadly battle?

"That's not what I meant at all. Gods, you're as temperamental as..." He stopped mid-speech, and then grimaced, as if he'd tasted something sour.

"As who?" She prompted. His scowl vanished and his eyes refocused on

her.

"Never mind that. My point was that battles are different from social gatherings. And also, there's another thing that's been bothering me."

"And that is?"

"Why did I beat you?"

Her scowl returned. "I would think that little explanation is needed on that matter. You were there, after all."

He didn't seem bothered by her tone this time. His gaze was downward, as if not really paying any attention. He was obviously deep in thought.

"I know. I've been thinking about our fight a lot. And knowing what I do now, I do not understand why I won."

"You were better. Faster. Smarter." It stung a little to say these things, but they were true, and she would not deny them.

He shook his head. "Faster I can accept. But I am not smarter than you, and definitely not better." Elsa would not disagree with him, because at this point they'd be arguing in circles. "From what I have seen of your powers, me and Toothless should not have come anywhere near you."

"I would like to think I know more about my powers than you do, Chief Hiccup."

"Of course, I don't deny that. Out of curiosity, can you tell me the limit of how much you can make? How fast you can make it? The shapes, the uses, you've tried it all and tested it all? You've scouted out all offensive capabilities?"

Elsa shook her head. He'd asked a lot of questions, none of which she particularly wanted to answer to.

Chief Hiccup waited out her silence. When it became apparent that no answer was forthcoming, he frowned and opened his mouth to say something.

A scratching sound from behind them distracted him, and he turned his head back to his companion.

"No, Toothless! Don't do that!" he admonished. Elsa turned her head as well, and saw that the dragon was using one of his claws to dig out a decent sized rock that had been planted in the grass near them. On hearing Hiccup's shout, he let it drop and backpedaled away from it, ears pressed flat to his head like a cat caught with its paws in the birdcage.

"Bad dragon! No ruining Queen Elsa's gardens."

Toothless grunted a soft assent and went back to his sand pit with a snort. He glared at the dragon for a few seconds, before returning to look at her. He regarded her for a few seconds, and she weathered his inspection with her chin held high and a raised eyebrow.

"Do you actively avoid using your powers offensively?"

Elsa pondered her answer as they sat there on the cool grass.

"There are situations where it is unavoidable. When I am attacked and my guards are not enough, for example."

His brow was furrowed in thought. It was almost endearing.

"But do you practice with it? Test your limits? See how much you can do?"

"Not since â€| a long time ago. There is no need for it."

"No need, you say â€|" The way he trailed off annoyed her, as if he disagreed but merely humored her.

"You disagree?"

"As you pointed out, I did beat you quite soundly."

"And you said that you weren't trying to boast."

Chief Hiccup's fists clenched, and he let out a frustrated growl that sent a jolt down her spine. "No one can give you self-worth, Elsa. You complain about the disparity in our combat effectiveness, yet you do not actively pursue it in your own time. You are afraid of your powers, yet you rely on them for your own security and that of your country. That kind of double standard can and will be your downfall, given half a chance."

Elsa felt hot fury rise through her. The nerve of this man, this guest in her home, he dared to assumeâ€| she stilled, taking a heavy breath as she calmed herself. "Is that a threat?" She asked with narrowed eyes, only to see him shake his head.

"It's not a threat. I've seen it happen. No matter who you are or what you can do, if you leave openings there is always someone out there that can and will exploit them."

She almost asked him if he spoke from personal experience. Almost. "I'm not afraid of my powers."

He looked her straight in the eye. "Aren't you?"

She bit back the indignant no that tried to leap from her mouth. The obvious answer was no. She'd stopped fearing and hiding her powers years ago. Arendelle had accepted her, her sister had accepted her. No, she'd never lost her sister's acceptance in the first place, it just took her a while to realize it. There was no need anymore for fear. She opened her mouth to say all this to Hiccup.

A flash of red in her memories stopped her, and she closed her mouth. In her mind's eye she watched as red colored, flawless ice spawned and devoured everything in its path; forests, fields, mountains, cities, people. She shivered, despite herself.

"I'm not afraid of my magic in itself." She said eventually. "But Hiccup, you have to understand, to use it in combat is a risk. A

terrible risk. If I lose control â€œ there's no telling what will happen."

Hiccup opened his mouth to answer but she held up a hand to stop him.

"There is another reason. This power I have, have had since childhood, it is great and terrible and beautiful. When I first just let it out, it felt like it could solve all of my problems, free me from all my responsibilities." She paused, gathering her thoughts, "But magic cannot solve my problems, it cannot run my kingdom, and it always has consequences. The hardest part of being able to flash freeze anything and anyone that annoys or threatens you, is learning how not to. Reaching for magic is the easy, and usually the worst solution to most of the problems I face day to day. My sorcery must be only used when it is necessary, because there is nobody who could stop what I could become if I let it control me instead of the other way around. Not even you."

She trailed off quietly, not looking at him. She did not really expect him to mock her, but even so, opening like this to him was not something she'd expected to do. Frankly, her reasoning was not entirely sound. Her reputation and that of her powers had been keeping Arendelle safe and mostly free of bandits for years. Now a Viking Chief knew one of her glaring weaknesses. Would he take advantage of it, down the line? Only time would tell.

She risked a glance at his face, feeling more vulnerable than she had in a long while. Contrary to his earlier frustration, he wore an expression of understanding and determination.

"I understand your reasoning, and I sympathize. It would be easy to use Toothless in a similar fashion, intimidation, control, burning stuff you don't agree with. When you have an unfair advantage on your subjects and on neighboring countries, you can go down that road without even realizing it. But there is a difference between that and understanding your own power. That's where practice comes in. Control is granted by skill and knowledge, by knowing your limits and expanding on them. You have an amazing gift, Elsa. You are unique in this world. It is a shame to not explore it to its fullest."

A gift? She blinked, trying to process his words. Well, it would make sense that someone as pragmatic as him would view it as a gift. But he hadn't had to grow up with it. With the fear of it. The fear of hurting her loved ones, of ruling while maintaining a lie. No, she could use many words for it, but gift was not one of them.

Still, it was a nice sentiment by someone who meant well, even if he didn't understand.

She shook her head. "You assume a lot about me."

He nodded. "I do, and maybe I'm just rambling here, but I truly do not see what you have to gain by limiting your offensive capabilities. Nobody said that you should go around freezing innocent people, but you should be able to take care of the first idiot who attacks you with a dragon."

Elsa smiled at his humor, shaking her head at his antics. In actually she was feeling very uncomfortable. He didn't really understand her,

but he wasn't entirely wrong either. His words had echoed several of her thoughts, over the years. But she'd never thought of it quite in such a pragmatic fashion.

"And when an idiot with a dragon attacks me, you'll be the first to know so you can set them straight."

"You've given me a lot to think about, for now. Can we go back to your supposed lack of dancing skills?"

He took her attempt to change subject in stride, grimacing dramatically and flopping back on the grass. "Must we?"

"Quite. I'll have someone by your quarters a little after sundown. Will that be acceptable?"

"Yes, yes. We'll be back from our flight by then. It will begin earlier than yesterday, because I want to attend court tonight. Ernie can take me there."

"Hmm. Court will eat away at your dancing lesson time, though."

"Can you tell the teacher to come later? I slept a lot, so I won't get tired very early. If it's a problem for him I can pay him extra or if he can't manage at all then I suppose I'll have to leave Court early."

"She will be agreeable with whatever time you wish. And what do you mean by pay? I said I would arrange it, didn't I? The woman will be on a retainer already, so there will be no need to pay."

"I don't have a problem with paying."

She looked at him sternly "Do not be stubborn, Hiccup. You're a guest here, and don't think I don't realize you're doing this for me."

"I'm not doing this just for you, but you have my thanks nevertheless, Queen Elsa." She jolted at the use of her title. Only now did she realize that they'd used each other's first name with no titles and quite a bit of familiarity several times during the course of this conversation. Some color rose to her cheeks, but she cleared her throat to push it down. The two of them stood up, brushing grass from their clothes. Elsa grimaced, imagining the grass stains on her dress.

"I'll be looking forward to tomorrow, then."

"As will I, though I should probably get back to Toothless now."

"And I to my work." Which was true. It had been an interesting and mostly enjoyable break, but it had taken longer than it should have and she had to get busy again.

"I'll be seeing you, then."

She nodded at him and he inclined his head respectfully, before turning on his heel and walking back towards the black dragon. Elsa watched him go until he vanished behind a bush, at which point she

continued her way towards the interior of the castle, replaying their conversation in her head again and again.

Upon reaching her office, she had pinpointed several things that she wished she hadn't said, or had said differently. She didn't feel particularly worried about it though. She had made the decision to trust Chief Hiccup, for now at least. A wry smile crept onto her face. That man had barely known her for a week, but he managed to puzzle her at every encounter.

She shook her head, and with it shook away thoughts of the Viking, for there was work to be done. She resigned herself to completing her remaining paperwork before lunchtime.

Feeling particularly hungry and not content to wait until the usual lunch time, she decided to have an early lunch. No one made a big deal about this particular meal, in any case. It was not unusual for her to eat alone, or with only Anna for company. Most days, that was how she preferred it.

She called for food to be brought up to her office, and sent a guard to bring Naya Avarice to her. Avarice was part of Arendelle's Dancer Guild, an organization dedicated to the arts of the body and its movements. As one of the Guild's top representatives and closer to the Chief's age than most other similarly qualified people, she was the best chance the Chief had of not actually making a fool of himself tomorrow.

Elsa did not believe that the Chief would actually make a fool of himself. Despite his occasional bouts of clumsiness and despite his prosthetic, she had witnessed the fluidity of his movements when he was consciously trying to stay on his feet, and she really would change the dance order to have the opener be something simple. At the same time, she didn't want him to give off the impression that he was barely hanging on, seeing as the ballroom would be full of all sorts of important people at the time. On the other hand, seeing his face go red in embarrassment would be worth it â€‘ maybe.

Decisions, decisions.

She was drawn out of her musings by the guards announcing the arrival of her lunch. Two servants entered as she made space in her desk for the two trays they carried. She thanked them and they bowed, before leaving her to eat in peace. She set to doing just that, habit making her maintain the same grace and poise she used during formal dinners attended by dozens of people.

Her lunch was disturbed by another knock on her door, more tentative than the previous, professional rap.

"Come in." She allowed after clearing her mouth with a napkin. The door was opened by one of her guards, who announced the entrance of Lady Avarice of the Dancer Guild. Naya was a young woman, the same age as Elsa herself, but had spent the majority of her life dancing, or learning how to. She was not so much pretty as she was stunning, with large hazel eyes and a cascade of light blond hair caught in a low ponytail that reached the curve of her back. Her lithe body wrapped in an elaborate dancer's dress of flowing blue fabric that crossed across the bodice and opened at the sides. She was a shade taller than Elsa. Giving her a critical look, Elsa decided that the

dancer would be just a bit shorter than the Viking Chief, but still within his immediate field of vision. Perfect, really.

She'd met Naya all of twice before, in person, but she boasted at least cursory knowledge of the majority of her subjects that worked in or around the palace.

"My Queen, you summoned me." Naya said with perfect politeness, then she performed a textbook curtsey, every elaborate step of it adorned with grace.

"Indeed I did, Miss Avarice."

"Please call me Naya, my Queen."

"As you wish. I have a task for you, if you are not terribly busy tonight and tomorrow."

Naya tilted her head and looked at her Queen with curious eyes.

"I am ready for whatever task you have for me, your majesty."

"Magnificent. As you know, we'll be holding a party tomorrow. I believe you are invited, as well."

"I am." Naya confirmed. As a high ranking member of the Dancer Guild, she was not only invited, but also highly sought after as an escort. Everyone wanted a partner that could make them look good by simply being there, and make them look great on the ballroom floor. Last Elsa had heard, the Prince from Corona had convinced her to go with him. Or had they known each other beforehand? She did not remember, and it did not really matter.

"There is a guest, a very important guest." Elsa explained. "That needs a crash course on ballroom dancing. It is imperative that he can at least follow the steps until tomorrow evening."

Naya frowned, her brow furrowing in thought. "I will of course do my best, but it is not easy to learn the steps and perform them naturally after only two sessions of practice."

"I don't think this particular student will give you any trouble."

"Who is he, if I may ask?"

"Of course you may. It is necessary for him to know, because he will be opening the dance with me, tomorrow."

Naya blinked in confusion for a second, before she made the connection. Her eyes widened as she lost her cool façade, and her mouth formed an 'O' of surprise before she spoke.

"You do not meanâ€" "

"Chief Haddock of the Vikings? Yes I do."

Elsa watched curiously as the professional dancer's cheeks were flushed with color. Naya smiled brightly and brought a hand to her

lips, as if to stifle sudden laughter.

"You know of him, I assume?" Elsa prodded, drawing an enthusiastic nod.

"Yes your majesty. I have seen him around the castle." Again her cheeks turned red, the pretty pink shade threatening to encompass her entire face. Elsa frowned. She was not unaware of what the other woman's problem was. The Viking chief, with his fur clothes, ruggedly scarred appearance and metallic foot, with his confident gait and his generous smiles had caused quite the uproar in Arendelle's community of single ladies, making gossip mongers work overtime to meet the demand. Elsa had watched with some amusement as Hiccup wandered through all of it, seemingly entirely oblivious of his effect on the women of her kingdom.

She frowned inwardly. Perhaps calling for one as young and beautiful as Naya had been a mistake.

Well, no way to back out of this now without gravely insulting the dancer. She pushed her sudden doubts away from her mind.

"I see." She said, allowing a frown to cover her face as she looked sternly at the other woman. "Then I assign this task to you, and expect completely professional conduct. Is that clear?"

Naya's eyes snapped to her and, if possible, she grew even redder, her keen wit not missing the implication. She stammered a reply.

"Ah, of course, your majesty. Strictly professional."

Elsa sat back, satisfied but still not losing her strict look. Perhaps she should be softer on the other woman, but if Naya went to the Chief and in any way expressed her attraction to him, the Viking could potentially think that Elsa had sent her for that exact reason. The conclusions one could draw from this were not ones Elsa wanted to be drawn.

"Chief Haddock wishes to attend Court tonight. Can you have a few hours with him after Court is adjourned?"

She bowed her head, finally returning to her normal coloration at the turn of their conversation to less embarrassing topics.

"Certainly."

"Give him twenty minutes to relax, then find him at his quarters. Will you require an open room to practice in?"

Naya thought of it for a second, before shaking her head. "For a complete beginner, the quarters should be wide enough. I will teach him the steps first and give him some basic tips on rhythm and reading the tempo of the dance."

"The Chief's assigned aide will, of course, be present." She did not want the scandal that would arise over her sending a dancer to be alone with a foreign royal in his apartments.

"Of course."

"I'll leave it to your capable hands, then. You should also arrange another session with him tomorrow. Maybe even two, if he feels up to it and you feel he needs it."

"We shall see, your majesty."

"That will be all Miss Avarice, thank you."

"My Queen." With another elegant curtsey, the dancer turned on her heel and exited her office.

Elsa's frown did not leave with her as she watched her retreat, but the reason behind it had changed. Naya was her age. In another life, perhaps the two would have grown up together, been friends. But when in meetings like this, the difference between Elsa and her peers became painfully obvious to her.

When Naya Avarice saw Chief Hiccup, she saw his ruggedly handsome appearance, his impressive scars, the confidence with which he carried himself and the sincere smiles that were always on his face. None of this was false, granted. Elsa would not deny all that, for she had noticed them herself. But these things were not what she truly saw when looking at him.

When Elsa looked at Chief Hiccup, she saw a representative and leader of a Viking tribe that could potentially bring misfortune to her beloved kingdom. She saw a man who, while appearing sincere, dripped mystery and unanswered questions whenever he opened his mouth. She could match any of his smiles for a frown or a contemplative furrow of his eyebrows and still have plenty to spare.

But most of all, she saw a featureless metal helmet, the gleaming tip of a deadly arrow, and felt the searing heat of dragonfire on her skin. Even now, the thought made her shiver at the potential horrors of dragon-backed warfare.

Perhaps Naya Avarice had the better end of the deal.

Looking down at her food, delicious as it was, she suddenly didn't feel all that hungry. She forced herself to eat some more before setting it aside.

There was actually little for her to do before the scheduled time for Court to be held, so she half-heartedly finished a few more papers before giving up, preferring to read them more carefully later than hastily sign something that she otherwise wouldn't.

That done, she rose again and exited her office. She set off on a wondering route around the castle; maybe she would locate her sister or one of her few friends in one of the corridors. Idly, she summoned a bit of frost that snaked around her hands and zig-zagged between her fingers.

She busied herself with talking to this or that person, both guests and locals, until she heard a loud animalistic cry, followed by the beat of strong, leathery wings that sent the air gushing about them. She turned her head to a window that opened at the Courtyard, just in time to see a black blur rocket upwards. The Chief's loud laughter reverberated among the castle's walls and reached even her ears.

The laughter stirred something inside her, and a quick look to the people around her showed the same faraway look. The Viking's hearty laughter and his ability to simply fly away, it spoke of the true meaning of freedom. A concept man has hunted for thousands of years but never managed to grasp.

The sky had always been the limit. Something humans could look at birds and be envious about. And here was a man that conquered even that.

She shook him out of her thoughts. She'd been given the chance to fly on the dragon, and had refused it. Her reasoning still stood. The sky was an unreachable dream for a reason. Her powers could bring her as high as she wanted, but she still would not do it willingly. Her place was here.

Eventually, she found Anna and Kristoff, just returning from lunch of their own. The three of them spent the time together until it was time for Elsa to get to Court. Kristoff had entered their little two-person family so seamlessly that Elsa could not believe it at first. The blond man had a gentle heart that could fit the whole world, and Elsa could see plain as day that he loved her sister with every single inch of it.

Sometimes, in the lonely refuge of her dark bedchamber, before sleep took her, Elsa envied her sister. To her, that kind of selfless love was but a distant dream, one that she gave up on more and more as she aged and the demands of her kingdom continued to pile on. Despite her resistance, she knew that she would eventually get married, whether she loved her match or not.

She said goodbye to her sister and Kristoff as they headed outside and she headed to her quarters to change her attire.

Her handmaidens assisted her in donning one of her more Queenly gowns, a flowing green piece that would not wrinkle in a bad way when she sat on the throne. Her hair was pulled up into an elaborate braid, and the royal circlet pinned firmly to her head.

Like always, she headed towards the Throne Room, followed by her handmaidens and a few members of her inner council that joined her on the way. The Throne Room was already full; the Queen was always the last to arrive.

Though she did not turn her head, Elsa did see the Chief, sitting in a chair on the row furthest on the back of the left hand side. She had to fight a visible reaction when she saw the dragon Toothless curled up on the empty space behind him, watching the proceedings with half-closed eyes. The people around the room were trying to be discreet with their looks towards the great serpentine creature, with varying degrees of success.

When he caught her eye, the Chief gave a respectful nod of his head. He had a hand on his chin, rubbing it idly.

Viking and dragon noted, Elsa proceeded to her throne and sat, announcing the beginning of tonight's Court session. For the next several hours, people of all castes and professions came before her to plead their cases. From foreign diplomats with treaties to peasants with complaints about wild dogs, she heard all of their pleas

or offers, asked her questions, and offered her judgment. There was also the occasional noble or foreign royal that was simply passing by Arendelle, and visited her Court in the politically correct way of saying 'hi there'.

Through it all, she would occasionally have a small reprieve and catch glimpses of the Viking chief, noting the look of interest and concentration as he watched the proceedings. The dragon behind him had fallen asleep, eyes closed and snoring softly, but he watched everything that went on in the Throne Room. Good for him; paying attention was important for a leader. Courtiers around the room still shot the sleeping dragon wary glances, Elsa noted with amusement.

Soon enough, Court was over for the day, and Elsa had dismissed the last case. As was customary everybody rose after she did and waited until she and her handmaidens had exited the Throne Room. She did not pause, walking away in search of Anna. She found her and together they headed for dinner in their private dining room.

As a rule, she did not work after dinner. The time was spent chatting with her sister about this and that, or simply being in the same room without saying anything while Elsa read a book and Anna silently fumed at her inability to draw—"not for lack of trying, Elsa noted. She covertly watched her sister's efforts with amusement.

Not long after, it was time for both of them to retire and so they did, after saying goodnight. On the way to her personal section of the castle, Ernie appeared around a corner and fell into step next to her. In a monotone, the young servant delivered his report, and was done by the time they had reached her door. She thanked him for his services cordially and bid him goodnight, to which he bowed and turned to leave. Elsa entered her quarters feeling drained after a full day. She washed quickly, pulled on a fresh nightgown, and was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Despite being tired when she fell asleep, her slumber was not dreamless. She slept fitfully and woke up panting and drenched in sweat. She could have sworn that she could feel the searing heat on her hands. When she looked though, all she saw was snow, called whilst dreaming and covering her arms and torso in an attempt to douse fire that wasn't there. Snow was also swirling around the room, mirroring her own frantic state.

She calmed herself after a few seconds of harsh breathing and the snow abated, before vanishing entirely. Soon, her room had returned to normal. She slumped back on her pillow with a groan of dissatisfaction, trying to ignore the uncomfortable way her nightgown stuck to her sweat slick back.

Looking to the left, she saw that sunlight was streaming in through her balcony door. Dawn had arrived and passed. With another groan, she forced herself to a sitting position and dreaded the state her hair must be in.

A family trait, her mother had said, winking at her while she brushed gently at her hair, many years ago. Anna and their mother had shared the same terrible case of morning hair. That knowledge did not make her feel better, however.

She rang for her handmaidens, before rolling ungracefully out of bed and towards the bathroom; when they arrived they twittered around her irritably as they made her presentable for the public.

To her pleasant surprise, no one joined her and her sister on the breakfast table. She did not dislike the company, but it always felt more relaxed when it was just the two of them. Anna asked her if she knew where Chief Hiccup was, but Elsa replied negatively. He'd obviously made other breakfast arrangements, and that was just as well. He'd been extended an indefinite invitation, but was by no means obliged to accept it every day. She grasped this chance to spend time with her sister, whose exuberance, while still present, was at least lessened so close to her awakening.

After breakfast, it was back to work for her. Her rounds over the castle yielded nothing new, but it was her time in the office that was full of surprises.

Perhaps, in hindsight, she should have expected it.

Every single member of her inner council, with the unsurprising exception of Madam Gertrude, had entered her office at some point and indirectly or directly asked her somehow gain the secrets of dragon taming from the Viking chief. Each cited similar yet slightly different reasons, depending on their position, but all agreed the state of Arendelle could not afford to not dip a finger in this proverbial honeypot, lest someone else does and the advantage is lost.

She couldn't exactly fault them, as she could see logic behind their arguments. There were no known dragons in Arendelle or the surrounding countries and kingdoms, but then again they'd believed them to be extinct. Who knew what else they were missing? It was better that their preparation be unnecessarily rather than inadequate.

On the other hand, this whole business reeked of infidelity. She did not want to attempt to manipulate the Chief in order to gain his secrets. It felt too underhanded for her tastes. The mere thought of it reminded her too much of how Hans had manipulated her own condition to try to elevate himself in a position of power.

But even feeling like this, the situation was one that she could not willfully ignore. Events had spiraled in ways that she could not have foreseen, when she originally invited the Chief to come here. Would she do the same, given the chance, knowing what she does now? She could not say.

Then there was her meeting with her Commander General. Mertok had visited her again today, at her own request this time, to update her on the status of their prisoner. She was disappointed, however, because the elder man had told her that while they'd began to get some answers, because of the mildâ€"comparativelyâ€"methods that they were using it was too early to take any words of his for the truth.

He had also stressed, once again, the need for more information on the dragons. A being of such power would always draw attention, and he informed her that foreign dignitaries would start making their moves, and soon.

The day had passed quickly, and before she knew it, preparations had begun for the gathering. She knew that Madam Gertrude's people were hard at work preparing the Ballroom and the Dining Hall. There was little she could do to help there. She did have a role to play, with the decorations, but that would come after the main preparations were done.

So she busied herself with other things, such as the guest lists, the seating arrangements, the fine tuning of the pieces the orchestra would be expected to perform, and the likes. When she was informed that the rooms were ready, she followed the servant to the Dining Hall first. It was an impressive room, cavernous and extremely long. So was the hardwood table that spanned the entire length of the room, groaning under the weight of the silverware and plates, but no actual food as of yet.

Once there, she raised her hands and her magic sprang up eagerly, snow forming around her shimmering trails creeping up the walls and ceiling to slowly solidify in magnificent sculptures of angels, fairies and humans and animals. The sculptures were small, but numerous, and aside from those, the walls themselves were covered with sheen of ice, which gave the room a bluish glow, reminiscent of her palace of ice atop the Northern Mountain. The ice did not emit much of a chill, and made for both impressive decoration and a pointed demonstration of her power.

The Dining Room done, she proceeded to the Ballroom, where she did the same, keeping the dÃ©cor less sizable this time, more elegant and discreet. Though she generally only added shapes and swirls along with the sheen of ice, four five meter tall statues stood at each corner of the huge ballroom.

There was no way any of the guests would forget exactly whose guests they were.

Satisfied with her handiwork, she left, heading back towards her quarters to begin preparations. The process of getting ready on nights like this took several hours. Her ladies in waiting, all women that she knew very well but didn't socialize with very much, helped bathe her with soaps and scented oils, something she really could not avoid at formal occasions. They laced her in a rich deep blue dress, and spent what seemed like an eternity dressing her hair with elaborate braids and sapphire pins, cooing over the rich fabrics and shiny jewels. When finally they followed her to the Dining Hall, she was already half tempted to cancel the whole thing and go to bed.

As customary, everybody was present before her, but standing. The huge table was already groaning under the weight of the food, but the true courses would be served after everyone had sat down and she had called for the dinner to begin.

She saw people of Arendelle and foreigners alike. Noblemen, merchants, aristocrats, artists, dignitaries and ambassadors, the room lacked for no one of importance. Everyone was dressed beautifully, though some did so with more taste than others. Gaudy chains, rings, elegant hats and elaborate dresses, fashions local and foreign were all in evidence around the table.

Her seat at the head of the table was placed at the other end of the

table than the door, so that she had to walk its entire length to reach it. On the way, people bowed to her murmuring respectful nothings as she passed. She tipped her head to each and generously offered her smile, until she had reached the end of the table. She saw her sister, who smiled brightly at her, and offered her a smile in return. Anna was really glowing tonight; she was wearing a stunning red dress with a ruby the size of a hen's egg sitting on her chest. Only after her gaze slid off of Anna did she notice him.

The Chief, as the only other ruler in attendance, was seated to her right. The table was big enough that several seats could be placed at the head of the table, but at this time it only held three. He was standing like everyone else, but did he not bow. Instead, he tipped his head in a show of respect and offered his hand to her.

Someone has brushed up on their manners, Elsa thought as she gave him her gloveless hand. He grasped it lightly and brought her knuckles to brush against his lips in the Arendellian fashion, Naya Avarice had evidently worked hard.

It was a far cry from the rough way he'd pulled her to her feet, days ago. Was it only a few days ago? It felt like much longer.

"Queen Elsa." He greeted her.

"Chief Hiccup." She took the opportunity to run her eyes over him, inspecting the choices no doubt selected by Ernie, or someone in charge of Chief Hiccup's wardrobe. It was a deep blue colored, complementing her dress and covered him completely from neck to feet, though no one could call it anything close to a dress. It was a robe, tight-fitting and with elegant black shapes knit in the material that, with some imagination, could be considered draconian in nature. Specially made, perhaps. Ernie had not mentioned an order of such, but maybe he had not deemed it of importance.

He was perfectly groomed, having gotten rid of the stubble that he had acquired over the last few days, and his hair was impressive as it always had been, if a bit longer than the men of Arendelle wore theirs.

"You look particularly dashing this evening, Chief Hiccup." She complimented him. He grinned for a split second before he pushed the smile down, but Elsa caught the flash of mischief in his eyes before they looked to the side, taking note of the dozens of eyes watching them, before settling back on her again. Whatever it was he had meant to say as a witty retort, he appeared to have swallowed it.

"You are too kind. I would say the same, but it would be inadequate. Back in Berk, we write songs about beauty such as yours."

A pretty blush finds its way to her cheeks, and she brought a hand to her mouth as a small giggle threatening to come out.

"You flatter me."

Chief Hiccup pulled her chair back for her and she graciously accepted, thanking him with a smile as she sat. The other guests followed suit.

Scores of servants appeared from hidden doors, carryings trays with

more starters and some light drinks.

Before anyone started eating, Elsa rose and softly clicked her spoon on a crystalline goblet, drawing the attention of everyone, as they were waiting for it.

"Thank you all for coming today to my small gathering." She said, receiving some polite clapping, to which she tipped her head.

"Please, enjoy the food our staff was kind enough to prepare. Try the wine, I can tell you it's a lovely year. Mingle with those around you, for we have some truly prestigious people gathered here today."

This drew slightly louder applause. Everyone loved to have their ego stroked. Elsa smiled, then turned slightly so that her body faced the Chief, was seated and looking at her, collected and calm. She allowed a servant to half-fill her goblet with wine before continuing.

"I would especially like to welcome Chief Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, who could not join us last time. It's an honor to have you here, Chief Haddock." As she said this, she raised her goblet in a toast and a forest of goblets followed hers as they spoke his name in unison.

The Viking raised his own glass. "It's an honor to be here, Queen Elsa." After the appropriate amount of polite murmuring, the guests started on the socializing and the food.

Small talk started mushrooming along the vast table, and soon everyone on the table was talking with someone, while servants came and went, carrying trays with various dishes and drinks on them to wet their throats and tease their bellies. Elsa made small talk with Anna and the Chief, talking about meaningless things for the most part.

"And how is Toothless?"

"Asleep, most probably. Bothering Ernie, if not. He agreed to stay with him."

"That was kind of him."

"It was, even though it would be him dealing with whatever problems Toothless caused in his boredom."

"Your presence would not have been required in such a case?"

"Toothless trusts Ernie enough to follow his instructions, if he deems them reasonable."

Elsa did not have anything to say to that. She had no reason to doubt his word, yet at the same time could not imagine the fearsome dragon obeying anyone else. She decided not to dwell on the dragon any longer, and try to enjoy the evening as much as she could.

"Do you feel prepared for the next part, then?" She asked him at some point.

"The dancing, you mean?"

"Naturally."

He smiled. "You'd be surprised. Whether that surprise will be of the pleasant variety, only time will tell."

"I trust your sessions with Naya Avarice went well?"

He smiled again, and his eyes sparked with mischief once again. She could recognize the look, she saw it in Anna's eyes often enough.

"As a matter of fact, it did. She was very professional. In all honesty, I don't think I've ever seen someone act more professionally in my life."

Elsa fought to repress the smile that threatened to appear on her lips, instead feigning a stern expression.

"She told you to say that, didn't she?"

His grin betrayed him. "I regret nothing."

Elsa allowed herself a brief laugh at his unrepentant attitude. "We didn't see you at breakfast." She noted.

He nodded. "I was invited by Naya to breakfast, to get to know each other in a less professional environment. Her words."

"Naya huh." She said, emphasizing the use of her first name, drawing a raised eyebrow from the Viking.

"Indeed. You see, some people don't mind being called by, and calling other people by, their first names."

She ignored the less than subtle dig. "I see. Well, I hope her efforts were fruitful."

"As do I."

A devious smile found its way to her lips, as she leaned just a little closer to the chief, resting her chin lightly on her hand and blinking innocently up at him.

"Well I hope you came well prepared. Your sessions with Miss Avarice in a controlled environment do not give nearly the same atmosphere as a filled ballroom, with everyone watching. Naya was just the appetizer."

Perhaps he found her stance or words provocative or uncomfortable, because he shifted in his seat, though he tried not to show it. Elsa's smile widened imperceptibly.

"I suppose that you play the part of the main course in this analogy?" He asked, a hint of irony on his voice. He may have tried to regain some control with sarcasm, but Elsa did not buy it. A teasing smile was the only answer she gave him.

Just in time, too, because right then servants appeared again, this time carrying the main course on their trays. Fresh salads and plates

full of delicious and expertly cooked dishes were brought in front of everyone, starting with the Queen. As was proper, she waited until everyone was served before picking up her utensils and taking the first bite.

Anna, exuberant as she was, ate with all the grace and elegance as befitting someone who was raised as a princess. The Chief, on the other hand, seemed to be struggling to imitate the poise and the slow, methodical eating of everyone around him. Nevertheless, she believed she was the only one close enough to notice his discomfort as his efforts were, for the most part, effective.

She slowly wiped her mouth with a handkerchief, though she knew it was spotless, before catching the chief's eye and very deliberately rubbing a spot on the right side of her chin. Getting the hint, the chief flushed a little in embarrassment as he wiped at the same spot, clearing it of a bit of sauce that had slipped there. He gave her a thankful nod and returned to his food.

The eating slowed down and the conversations picked up again, as the elite of Arendelle and several foreigners discussed matters that they deemed important. Politics, trade agreements, prices, commissions, alliances and betrayals, all were discussed in the low tones of the dozens of conversations that sprang up along the table. So, too, did Elsa discuss with her sister and occasionally the Chief who, despite his discomfort at the new environment and the many people staring at him as if expecting him to grow wings and start setting things on fire any second now, was making notable effort to not withdraw into himself.

The time passed in good spirits, and soon the main course was withdrawn and the desserts were brought out. Equally impressive creations of fruits, chocolate, variety of creams and everything else the mind could think of. Elsa took no small amount of satisfaction at the way the Chief could not quite hold back his wonder at the variety and, as he told her, the taste. He described it as 'divine, for surely such food is fit for the gods'. Though not knowledgeable on his religion, there was no way to misinterpret this particular compliment.

Very soon the dinner was done, the guests stayed a while longer, too full for vigorous movement right then, Elsa decided to let the feast settle a little before calling for the dancing to begin. But finally the doors opened, and everyone took this as their cue to rise and orderly exit the Dining Hall. Elsa's side of the table, where the higher ranking people sat, left last, Anna shot her a bright smile before locking hands with the Commander General and practically dragging him out, talking animatedly to the much older man. Elsa rose, as did the Chief.

He offered her his hand with a soft smile, which she accepted. It was customary for everyone to get settled in the Ballroom before the Queen arrived. They walked slowly, with only a few handmaidens and guards around them, towards the Ballroom, as the Chief lowly recounted his reaction when Ernie showed him the cavernous space. Elsa smiled, and promised him that what he had seen and what he was about to see, well, they were two different things.

It felt strangely comforting to drape her hand around his arm. She had been in this situation with other royals before, both as Queen

and as Princess. It always felt as simply a formality, simply something that royalty did. It felt â€¢ different, this time. Many things about tonight seemed different.

She threw a side-glance at the Chief as they walked, and found his eyes locked on hers, his mouth upturned in a half-smile, the mischievous glint still lingering there. Busted, she looked ahead again, the red tinge reappearing in cheeks. If asked, she would blame the wine.

The arrived at the entrance to the Ballroom, and waited to be announced. She caught the Chief's eyebrow twitch, and thought he must be fighting to repress an eye-roll or a sarcastic comment. From what she'd gathered, Vikings tribes were not big on formalities for formality's sake. Still, he kept his thoughts to himself.

She watched him carefully, though discreetly, and noted the widening of his eyes and parting of his lips with great relish, once the Ballroom came into view. He did not freeze, but his eyes darted with childlike glee, taking in everything at once. From the crowds of people, to the stage with the full orchestra that had been set yesterday, to the ice decorated walls and the statues, the Chief's sharp eyes missed nothing.

"Very impressive. I can see your personal touch in the decorations." He noted as Elsa led him inside the room. The guests had been separated into two groups, forming a path for the Queen and the Chief to go through. If there had been more royalty present then they, too, would have entered at the same time and gone through the same path. As it was though, the two of them had the full attention of the dozens of guests as they walked closed to the stage, at the center of the dance floor where the space was cleared. Everyone knew where to stand and where not to, when to move or when to wait.

"Thank you." She replied. She saw, on the crowd of the people around them her small council, her sister, and several ambassadors. A wide circle had been cleared for them at the center of the room, near the stage. There she stopped, turning directly to the Chief and flashing him a smile.

He looked pale, but determined. He gently held her hand, while placing the other on her waist, as the music began. He held her perhaps a little further away than he should, but his form was otherwise okay. The music started off slow, as did the dance itself. The Chief's eyes were split between looking at his feet, probably to avoid stepping on her, and her face. On the other hand, Elsa had no such fear, and never took her eyes off of his own. This was harder in practice than in theory, as the Chief was quite a bit taller than her. He looked ready to start sweating, or have an anxiety attack.

"Relax," she whispered, "you're doing great."

And he was. While technically he was leading, he was performing the basic steps and merely following Elsa's cues. An experienced dancer herself, Elsa subtly led him through the piece, and over the next minute or so the Chief seemed to relax. He was a decent dancer, for having started only yesterday, but he was excellent at following her prompts and hints. It didn't appear that she was leading him, and he didn't make a fool of himself, so that was a win in Elsa's

book.

Apparently the Chief himself agreed, for as he grew less nervous he relaxed from his rigid posture, and finally started thinking of things other than how to avoid tripping or making any overly clumsy moves. He seemed to forget that the whole room was looking at them, too, because he focused on her and Elsa could see the flush of excitement on his face as he looked down on her. He was starting to enjoy this.

With some surprise, she realized that she could not hear the soft click sound of his prosthetic as it made contact with the marble floor. A brief look downwards did not solve her curiosity, but the Chief noted her look and guessed what she was thinking.

"Custom made pads. Work perfectly." Elsa was impressed, and told him as much.

Before long, they were joined by many others couples. As the music played on and they were no longer the center of attention, the Chief relaxed even more, to the point of smiling at her as they danced slowly. Elsa returned the smile.

"You'll be glad to know that my surprise was of the positive variety."

"I am glad, come to think of it."

"As I said, you're doing fine."

"You're the one doing fine, I'm just trying to do what you're doing."

"And you're doing a great job of that."

He shook his head ruefully, not rising to the bait.

"You're very good at this." He noted. "I can tell, even though you're limiting yourself to my own ability."

"I'm no professional dancer, but my profession does require dancing."

"I can't say I envy you."

"It's not as bad as you make it sound, you know. We're having a good time, are we not?"

He threw a brilliant smile her way. So caught by surprise was she, that she almost missed the next step.

"Yes, we are. I suppose I'll have to take your word for it."

"Having said that, not all occasions provide company such as yourself."

He laughed and shook his head. Close as they were, his hair nearly touched her.

"You're just saying that, though I appreciate the sentiment."

"It's rude to assume."

He looked at her with a curious expression, as if trying to figure something out.

"I don't presume to know you, but you seem much more cheerful tonight than you usually are."

She smiled. "Are you implying something regarding my disposition?"

He didn't rise to the bait, again. "You know what I mean."

She did. She took her eyes off him for a bit, to look around at the people dancing merrily, talking to each other and laughing together.

"How can I not be happy?" She said. "In the midst of all this?" It was the truth. The happiness of her people always brought a smile to her face. To see such concrete proof and to be the cause of it â€‘ few things could compare.

The Chief took a few seconds to follow her gaze and inspect their surroundings, no doubt trying to see what she was seeing.

"Surely you understand." She said, for Hiccup Haddock seemed like the kind of leader to take joy from the joy of his subjects.

"Yes." He said after a few seconds. "I understand. It truly is a great feeling to love and be loved by the people you're responsible for, and to know that you are doing right by them."

He couldn't have nailed it any better if he'd shot one of his arrows at it.

"It wasn't always this way." She said before she could stop herself. Immediately she wished she could take the words back, cursing her need to feel an otherwise perfectly comfortable silence. He looked at her again, the smile slipping off his face.

"Master Bjorgman mentioned it, I think. He told me some of what happened four years ago, after your coronation."

"I apologize, it is not conversation fit for dancing."

He looked down at her steadily as they span in slow circles "Do not feel the need to limit yourself or your words in my presence, if something is bothering you."

She shook her head. "It's not that. I've dealt with those issues a long time ago. I should not have brought up something like that right now, however."

"Your people love you." The Chief said simply. She smiled again.

"I know, but thank you."

The first piece finished with a few final, soft notes, and they stopped their slow spinning, along with everyone else. The let go of

her hand and waist and took a step away. As one, everyone turned and clapped politely for the orchestra. The second one would start shortly.

"I didn't do too badly for a beginner, did I?" He asked with a smile. A far cry from his earlier nervous countenance.

"No," she replied "you didn't. But it's not over yet."

Rather than a smile or a witty comment, he did this weird thing where he bit the right half of his lower lip.

"My apologies Queen Elsa, but I have promised my second dance of the evening to my teacher."

Even as he said this, Elsa saw one of the couples closest to them approach. They were none other than Naya Avarice and Prince Eugene. An irrational wave of irritation overtook her, and she frowned. She had not expected that the Chief would dance with anyone else. Not that he didn't have the right to, of course, only that she didn't see him as simply dancing with people he did not know. Then again, how well did she know him to make such assumptions? And even so, he'd obviously reached friendly terms with his teacher, despite meeting her only yesterday.

She paused a, slightly set smile on her face.

"Of course."

Perhaps he noticed something in her tone or her expression, because he frowned lightly before replying.

"The rest of the evening I'll be at your disposal."

She nodded cordially at his words, then turned towards the approaching brown-haired man. Prince Eugene, forgoing the usual princeling grooming habits, had chosen to leave a stylish, short beard along his jaw bone, along with a short mustache.

When he reached her, he bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty." He greeted.

"Prince Eugene, always a pleasure." As she said this, she saw on her peripheral the Chief greet Naya with a bright smile and laugh at something she said, before he took her hand and got in position to begin dancing to the tune of the starting piece. Naya must have said something to him, because he laughed again.

Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she gave her hand to the prince and allowed him to lead her through the first steps.

"And how has your lady wife been? I have missed her since her visit."

"Prettier every time I see her."

"I'm sure the fact that she's carrying your baby helps."

He raised an eyebrow at her. Elsa was glad to not have to look up at

him to notice that.

"News travel fast, I see."

"I have my ways."

"But yes, it is true. I'm going to be the worst father that has ever existed, but I'm gonna be a father anyway."

"I'm sure you'll be great."

"I'm sure I'll be given no choice but to be."

She smiled. Eugene's casual sense of humor always made her smile. He had made quite the scandal when he was announced as betrothed to the princess of Corona, as he was but a mere citizen before that, with rumors that his profession had been on the wrong end of the law, but Elsa never much minded. She liked him. He was a positive person with a highly sarcastic sense of humor.

"I wish the best of health for your wife and child."

He smiled brightly at that, and his eyes were faraway, no doubt imagining the princess of Corona there in front of him. It was so sweet as to be almost nauseating.

"Thank you. I will pass your words to her."

"And how have you been finding your evening?"

"Pretty good, I say. Not as fun as last time, but then again I came alone this time."

"I see you found a suitable person to cover you lack of dancing skills."

He snickered at that.

"Naya took pity on me and saved me the embarrassment."

" I apologize for Chief Haddock for taking her away from you, then."

Eugene looked sideways, at the merrily dancing couple of the northman and the professional dancer, who were talking animatedly even as they danced, before turning his gaze to her.

"I do not mind. I'd say I got the better end of the deal, actually."

Elsa smiled, releasing his shoulder for a second to lightly swat him with the freed hand.

"You flatterer."

"Seriously. Naya is my friend, but if I were him I wouldn't let you go all evening."

"You are a married man, you know."

"I do know, which is why I used the words '_if I were him'_. "

"You exaggerate."

He raised an eyebrow at her. For a former criminal, he sure took care of his facial hair.

"I've seen the way he looks at you."

Elsa frowned, catching the Chief in her peripheral and turning her eyes to look at him for a second. He was concentrating on his partner without looking away.

"And what way is that?"

Eugene regarded her for a few seconds without saying anything, as they slowly danced to the music of the orchestra. The easy steps that she had arranged had made certain that conversation would not be hindered.

"You don't see it, do you?"

See â€| what, exactly? "Chief Haddock has been perfectly professional and polite for the duration of his stay here."

Eugene shook his head in an exaggerated fashion, and sighed dramatically.

"I'm not above swatting you again." She warned him.

"I'm not ruining this for you kids. You figure it out. By god, I think it'd be a good idea to take all royals and throw them on the streets for a few years."

Elsa could not repress a snort at the absurd notion.

"And that would help, how exactly?"

"It might make you understand people better, for one."

Elsa shook her head, still chuckling.

"Thanks, but no thanks." She would usually not let anyone talk to her like that, but Eugene's directness and good nature was refreshing.

"Yeah? Well, good luck with him, then." There was no doubt as to who he was.

"There is no luck needed where there is no goal to be achieved."

He snorted. "Sure, let's go with that."

They danced for the rest of the song, chatting idly about this or that. Elsa laughed at Eugene's jokes, and he pretended to listen to her when she gave him advice.

When the music lulled and the next one started picking up, Elsa looked for the Chief but saw him still handheld with the professional dancer, not looking like he was about to let go anytime soon.

Resolving not to let it get to her, she mentally shrugged and went looking for another partner, waving to Eugene as he left the dancing area to join the people sitting at the edges of the room with drinks.

Smiling, she allowed the General to lead her into a dance. He'd forgone his usual green military suit for a darker green, flashier military suit specifically designed for such occasions. Elsa could not remember the last time she'd seen him in civilian clothes.

Having lived in the castle for most of his life, and certainly all of hers, Mertok was a surprisingly good dancer, though they both preferred a more casual and slow pace. They had pleasant conversation for the duration of the piece, with one notable exception.

"Be careful how you act around Chief Haddock."

She'd frowned at that. "What do you mean?"

"Only that you are the center of attention, and you seem to have forgotten that."

"I have done no such thing."

"Just giving you some advice, my Queen."

Excluding that nonsensical exchange, their time had been pleasant. After that piece had ended, too, she'd been approached by the Viking, who looked flustered. He bowed his head after coming to a stop in front of her.

"Apologies, Naya had detected a mistake in my pace and decided another dance was needed to correct it."

Elsa threw him a doubtful look, but did not comment on that. The music had picked up again, so he allowed the Chief to take her in his hands.

"This one is a little faster. Can you keep up?"

"I should. I recognize this." He said, exuding more confidence than she'd seen from him all evening.

The music was a little faster than the first two pieces, and it showed. The Chief made a few more mistakes here and there, and came dangerously close to stepping on her one time, but otherwise he performed fine. By the end Elsa had forgotten that she was annoyed with him and was smiling as brightly as her sister, who had decided to ignore the music and dance furiously with Kristoff, who looked hapless but enjoying himself nonetheless. He'd joined them after dinner, not being able to make it in time for the feast itself. He looked a little uncomfortable in his white suit, but seemed to get over it quickly.

The Chief's earlier urge to hold her at a distance seemed to have evaporated as well, as he had no trouble holding her close to him, in accordance with the faster turns and steps. Elsa could feel his warm breath on her face, curiously recognizing mint. His hands were calloused and rough, not at all the soft and tender flesh that she

knew all nobles had, but he held her gently nonetheless.

The freckles on his face were almost indistinguishable from the rest of his skin by the time they were done, as he had a healthy flush on his face that she was sure was mirrored in her own. He was smiling widely, as was she. The music ended, and they, as well as everyone else, clapped politely for the musicians.

"If it please you, can we go get a drink?" The Chief said, no doubt wanting a reprieve and eyeing the tables where servants were passing around drinks.

"Very well." She could do with something to wet her throat, which was feeling particularly dry.

He offered her his hand again, which she took, and they walked to the tables, the people separating respectfully to let them pass. The Chief accepted two goblets and thanked the servant girl that gave them, before offering one to her. They toasted and drank, Elsa closing her eyes as she savored the drink, releasing a contented sigh as she held the goblet in both hands.

Elsa knew that she should get back out there. At times like these, she was supposed to mingle, to go around and talk to as many people as she could, being pleasant and respectful and letting the people get to know their Queen and the foreigners who they were dealing with. That is what had done every other time for years.

Seeing the Viking's half-smile as his eyes focused on her, she decided that she would not do that, this time. She'd invited him as her escort, and he had come solely for her benefit. It would be rude to ditch him now, not to mention hypocritical after the way she'd gotten worked up over him giving two dances to someone else.

They found a pair of seats to sit on while they emptied their glasses, and Elsa found that conversation with the Chief flowed easily. He had a wicked sense of humor, and he had the political savvyâ€"required of any good leaderâ€"to follow what she told him in regards to her kingdom.

In turn, he told her a bit about his friends. He spent several minutes describing one fellow in particular who, from what Elsa gathered, was big, had an inclination towards numbers and had a hard time at social interactions. He told her about the big man's arranged wedding and the struggles he faced due to his sometimes overbearing wife. He had been there when the man had finally had enough and exploded, somehow earning the respect of his wife in the process. Now, he told her, he was waiting anxiously for his second kid to pop out.

Elsa would never for a second buy that his name was 'Fishlegs'. Sure, it kind of made sense that a tribe that named their heir 'Hiccup' would name the other kids even more terrible names, but he had to be pulling her leg on this one, right?

When she told him this, the Chief burst in a fit of loud laughter that drew startled looks from the people around them. Elsa looked at him in confusion, until he calmed down enough and informed her that his first cousin was actually named 'Snotlout'.

What could Elsa say to that?

They cut their discussion for another round of dancing. After three cups, the Chief was feeling much more adventurous and tried his hand at a faster piece. Elsa, feeling slightly buzzed, herself, happily went along with it, though she had the presence of mind to correct his form and tell him a specific step now and then. Even with the impromptu training session, the Viking soaked up all she could teach him like a sponge, and put them to good use immediately. Elsa could not remember the last time she had this much fun dancing. Or, for that matter, the last time she had fun dancing, at all. To her, dancing on such occasions was part of her job description, not something she did because she chose to and enjoyed.

The Chief's occasional mistakes were only cause for laughter between them, as the tall man was obviously used to his clumsiness and took it in stride. Elsa herself snickered, but corrected him whenever she could. When they stopped again, four music pieces later, both were sweating lightly and had flushes of exertion on their faces. They returned to their previous table to cool off and have another drink.

This time, Elsa told him anecdotes of her time growing up, fondly recounting memories of her parents to him. Rather than pity her, as many had, he was interested and asked her questions about them. As an orphan himself, he could relate. She also told him some of her sister's attempts to reach out to her, often with humorous and/or disastrous results.

They also took some time going to other tables, the Chief following her around and being introduced to some important people. It wasn't the same as her going around and talking to as many people as she could, but it was the next best thing as she got to stay with the Chief and he got to meet several of the people that wanted to talk to him before they returned to their table.

Two drinks and an hour later, people were beginning to file out, the night's activities coming to a gentle close. Elsa was feeling particularly light, and did not feel the need to question her weirdly happy mood.

Anna and Kristoff found them at their table, about ready to take off. Her sister took one look at her face, probably noting the redness of her cheeks, and her smiling face, and declared without hesitation: "You're drunk."

Elsa frowned. "Queens do not get drunk." She chided, shaking a finger at her sister. "Only slightly inebriated."

Anna looked from her to the Chief. To Elsa's consternation, the Chief seemed to take the alcohol much easier than she did, though he, too, sported a red tinge on his cheeks. He was smiling.

"Are you trying to get my sister drunk, Chief Hiccup?" Anna asked. Rather than get insulted, the Chief took it in good humor, as it was intended.

"Indeed. It is part of my evil plan, you see."

"I'm afraid I'll have to end your dastardly plot, then, by taking

this young, innocent maiden away from your clutches."

"Curses!" The Chief said dramatically, shaking a fist at Anna.
"Foiled again. Oh well, there's always next time."

They both rose to the sound of Anna's exuberant laughter. Giving alcohol to Anna was a bad idea and all the servants knew this, yet somehow she had managed to get her hands on some. Perhaps she'd bribed one of the servers?

Despite her sister's words, she was not drunk, and the world was not spinning around her. She had to only barely concentrate to make sure her steps were as even and balanced as they always were. The four of them left the room in quiet conversation, until Anna and Kristoff bid them goodnight and headed in a different direction.

She and the Chief walked in companionable silence, with Elsa still having her arm looped around his. The night was not yet over and until it were, he was her escort.

She followed him until the door to his quarters, at which point they both stopped and turned to look at each other.

Still riding the euphoric feeling of the alcohol and the great evening, Elsa had no trouble speaking first, a smile on her face.

"I had a great time tonight, Chief Hiccup."

"As did I. Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank you for coming."

He smiled back at her, and she took this as her cue to release his hand and take a step backwards. He, in turn, put his hand on the door handle, as if to open it, but he hesitated. Hand still at the door, he turned and looked at her again.

"If I can ask for one last thing?"

Down, girl, she chided herself as her imagination could not help but immediately jump to conclusions. She must have drunk more than she'd thought. Shaking her head once to clear it, she replied evenly.
"Go on."

"Call me Hiccup, at least for tonight?"

She smiled brightly, and even her alcohol-fueled imagination was satisfied with this outcome. "Goodnight, Hiccup."

With that said, she turned and walked slowly away, but not before catching the faint, "Goodnight, Elsa" coming from the Viking.

She all but floated to her bedchambers, her mind swirling with thoughts and feelings but focused on nothing in particular, excitement nearly oozing out of her.

She undressed by herself and washed, before putting on her nightgown. As she lay on her bed, it took a while for her hyper mood to pass and for sleep to overtake her. Until it did, she kept replaying the evening in her mind's eye again and again, and dreading the teasing

she would receive from Anna about it.

The next thing she knew, she was fluttering her eyes open and sun was streaking in through the balcony door. She rose mechanically, rubbing her face and running a hand through her hair.

Slowly, memories of last night trickled in through the haze of drowsiness. As they did, so did a brilliant smile grow on her face. She rose rapidly, heading to the bathroom to wash the sleep completely off of her as she replayed the events in her head. She took her time, meticulously tending to her hair as she considered. She decided to forgo her usual braid and instructed her handmaidens to tie it up in a tight bun, just below the top of her head.

After her morning rituals were over and she had been clothed, she headed over to the breakfast room. Being earlier than usual, she didn't see anyone there. She sat down as servants prepared her table, content to wait.

Soon, the door opened, allowing her sister entrance. Elsa was, of course, glad to see her, but the gigantic smile on her sister's face that threatened to split her face in two made her slightly wary.

Anna immediately launched herself at the seat next to her sister. Not content with that, she latched onto Elsa's hand, almost hugging it.

"What happened last night?" She gushed.

"I believe you were there." Elsa replied neutrally.

"Don't give me that! You actually had fun! And you drank! You never drink more than a glass. And you never stay with the same person all evening!"

"You use the word never quite strongly."

"You know what I mean. So, how was he? Did you have as much as fun as you appeared to?"

Elsa gave a mysterious smile that she knew would drive her sister mad and did not reply, instead reaching with her free hand to pour herself some coffee.

"Elsa~" her sister whined, drawing out the word in the way one would expect young children to. Elsa took her time, taking a sip of her coffee, before turning to look at her sister and slowly letting a smile appear on her face.

"It was amazing." She declared, and it was all Anna needed to hear. Her sister squealed, quite loudly at that, and wrapped her arms around Elsa, threatening to imbalance both them and her coffee, which she thankfully managed to save.

"Tell me everything!" Her sister commanded. Elsa was only happy to oblige. She would normally be more careful when talking about her evening with a foreigner, especially because of her status as an unmarried Queen, but with her sister there was no need for such reservations. Besides, nothing had been done that would even look

suspicious, she'd been extra careful about that.

She was thankful that, once again, nobody joined them for breakfast, because it gave her the opportunity to describe all the went on last evening to her sister from her own perspective.

Of course, Anna had been merciless, teasing her for all she was worth, but Elsa had years of practice in shrugging off such things from her, so she wasn't bothered, as well as knowing that her sister had no basis on which to tease her. After Anna's curiosity had been suitably sated, the conversation moved on to the banquet itself, and then to more general topics.

After breakfast and saying goodbye to her sister, she began her daily rounds of the castle, taking care of any problems or simply making sure that there weren't any. Her time in the office was similarly uneventful, with only a few people requiring private audiences and those cases not being things that needed too much thought.

She had lunch normally with Anna, and Kristoff joined them this time. In the last few years, Kristoff had bought a place to live in the city, wanting to be close to Anna whenever he could but disliking the idea of freeloading at the castle. Noble of him, though unnecessarily so.

Conversation with Kristoff always seemed to just sort of happen, even though he, himself, was awkward and even shy as a person. He'd gotten used to her, with time, but some it would never truly leave him, Elsa believed.

After lunch, she thought it prudent to take some time for herself before Court began. Hence, she headed towards the Gardens. She did not lie to herself and say that she did not go specifically there hoping to meet the Chief.

Indeed, she spotted the dragon's lumbering shape and headed towards it. Toothless was, by all appearances, napping, and the Chief was sitting on the grass next to him, his back propped against a rock formation and had a wide parchment open and set on his lap. He didn't spot her immediately, but as she came close he must have heard her, for he looked up. His eyes widened imperceptibly upon taking her in, but he offered no further reaction besides a casual smile.

"Queen Elsa," he greeted her, "good day."

"Isn't it just?" She agreed, coming to a stop in front of him. He returned his gaze to the parchment, fiddling with the quill on his hand. Elsa spotted an inkpot â€| tied to a leather wrist-brace on his hand? What a quirky contraption.

Without looking up, he patted the spot next to him on the grass. She blinked once, but took it in stride, folding her dress under her and sitting lightly. Hopefully they wouldn't stain this time.

She looked at the parchment that was to be her map, and blinked in confusion. The masses of lines and notes made no sense to her, and upon inquiry, she was informed that it was but the groundwork for the actual map.

She stayed with the chief for a couple of hours, keeping light

conversation. They talked about the previous evening, exchanging equally positive impressions. After that, Elsa asked him some more about Berk. He took some time to think of his answer, before going into detail and expanding on what he had already told her, days previous. Situated as it was on a mountainous island, Berk's main trade was ore and lumber, as the forests were as plentiful as the rocks and the minerals. Besides the actual materials, they used those to make top-tier weapons, armor and gear. They would trade such for livestock and finer things which the Vikings did not have the know-how or time to make.

Elsa took this in carefully, as she had been meaning to ask him about Berk's trade interests for some time. That knowledge, coupled with the map the Chief was making even now, would potentially give life to her plan to start a trade route between their provinces.

They rose when the Chief declared it time to fly. He folded the parchment several times and kicked Toothless awake, only to receive a shove by dragon tail for his rudeness. Elsa accompanied the both of them to their quarters and waited outside as they prepared. Seeing the Chief in his native gear was still strange, as she was growing much more used to seeing him in the tunics provided for him. His leather armor and metallic helmet sparked unpleasant memories and thoughts that she otherwise would not have. She must have looked ridiculous, glaring at his helmet like that, for he shuffled and held it on his right side, so that she could not see it.

She accompanied them to the Courtyard, and waved at the Chief when he did the same, right before rocketing off practically vertically. It wasn't the first time she'd seen them do it, but it still shocked her to see the duo in action. His joyous laughter once again echoed through the castle as they circled around it, going higher and higher before veering off and heading towards the mountains, soon getting lost in the clouds.

Her smile slowly vanished as the black shape did the same, in the distance. She waved at some of her subjects that had gathered to see the, now daily, show of the Chief taking off, and went inside the castle.

In a few hours, Court was set to begin. Once again when she entered she saw the Chief, sitting in the same chair, as far back as he could, with Toothless behind him. The dragon wasn't sleeping this time but he might as well have been for all the attention he gave to his environment. It was apparent, even to Elsa, that the great serpent was bored.

The session went normally, even as everyone tried to ignore the dragon in the room. Elsa did not give the Chief much mind, as she was trying to concentrate on her job.

After Court, Anna found her and all but dragged her to spend time together. Elsa did not offer any sort of resistance, though she would not allow herself to be dragged through the hallways. The rest of the evening was spent with Anna getting them into trouble with the servants, and Elsa getting them out of it. While she might have put up an indignant front, running around the halls on her Queenly dress with her sister at her side was not so bad, even if it left her breathless at the end and agonizing over the state of her hair.

At the end of it, the both of them had to suffer a stern lecture from Madam Gertrude about terrorizing her staff. Even Elsa hung her head in shame at the dressing down. She may have been the Queen, but especially because of that fact, Gertrude had said, she was expected to conduct herself with more maturity and not cause trouble, and to rein in Anna when she decided to do so.

After the half hour lecture, Elsa was glaring daggers at Anna, who had difficulty controlling a fit of giggles.

As she was walking back to her bedchambers, tired and ready to sleep, Ernie fell into step besides her. With a nod, she allowed him to start.

He did so, giving his report on the Viking's activities of the day, at least the ones he had been present for. Considering he was there for most of it, there weren't many gaps left, and even for those, he had eyes and ears in the form of the rest of the servants.

When he was done and she nodded at him, he did not simply bow and go on his way. He cleared his throat again, clearly indicating that he had more to say, though his report was finished.

She stopped, and turned to look at him, arching an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Is there something else?" She asked.

"There ~~is~~ is." He said, obviously hesitating, as if unsure of himself. That was unusual of the young man.

"Go on then. Say it."

"I have ~~a~~ a request, my Queen."

She raised her eyebrows. Ernie never asked for things. He wasn't the type. So what could it possibly be?

"I will hear of it, then."

"I would like to ~~be~~ be relieved of my duty."

"Relieved of you duty?"

"Yes, your majesty. I no longer wish to give reports on the Chief's activities. I have delivered my report for today, as is my duty, but I would like to be replaced, effective immediately."

Elsa was flabbergasted. Ernie had never been one to shirk his duty, and this had not been the first time he'd been assigned to dubious guest.

"What brought this on?"

He took a few seconds to collect his thoughts, before replying. His hands had not left their usual position, clasped behind his back, but his brow was furrowed, it was obvious that he was troubled.

"I dislike the idea of abandoning my post but ~~I~~ I can no longer in good conscience continue. Hiccup has become ~~a~~ a friend, in the few

days that we have known each other. A friend, not a duty."

"I see." And Elsa did see the distinction. His stance was admirable, and certainly understandable. "You should know, however, that should you be replaced, you will be reassigned, and will probably not have enough time to spend with your new friend."

"I am aware, my Queen."

"Yes still you choose to stop?"

"Yes. I can not justify to myself to spy on a friend. I would rather lose my time with said friend than keep on as I have."

"I see."

"Will I see my request granted, then?"

"No."

"No?" Ernie repeated, losing his near perfect control of his emotions and letting surprise and frustration color his voice.

"No, you will not be replaced."

"I see." He said. He frowned, but bowed his head. "Then I will do as my Queen commands."

"No you don't see. I wasn't finished." Elsa cut him off. "You will not be replaced, but you can stop giving me detailed reports."

"Truly?"

She nodded. "Yes. You can keep your post as his guide, and nothing beyond that. That said, I expect to be informed if something important takes place, or you come to seriously suspect something. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, my Queen. Many thanks."

"None needed, Ernie." And in hindsight, the fact alone that it was the Chief who had given Ernie his new name should have been a sign of what was to come. "Now, is there anything further?"

"Nothing, your majesty."

"Dismissed."

This time he did bow smartly, before turning on his heel and walking away, a little faster than normal. Elsa watched him go with a fond smile, before shaking her head and proceeding to her quarters.

When she woke up the next morning, she had the distinct feeling that she had just had a very pleasant dream, though she could not remember it. She had a small smile on her face as she rose, rather than the usual disgruntled expression. Even the state of her hair did not set her in a mood as it usually did. Whatever the dream had been, it must have been good.

Breakfast that day was a big affair, as the entire inner council and the Viking chief himself had decided to attend. As they all had standing invitations, it was not unexpected, though it was rare that everyone gathered together. They could not discuss delicate matters with her sister and the chief present, but there were still a lot to be discussed, which left her sister and the chief to make idle chatter amongst themselves.

When she got to work in her office, the only notable thing that occurred was one more visit from her Commander General. Once again, she had invited him.

"You have sent for me, your majesty?"

"I have." She said, not taking her eyes off of several pieces of paper on her desk. "Did you order these made?" She finally asked, turning the papers around and pushing them towards him. He took them in hand and inspected them, before setting them down again.

"I did." He replied without hesitation.

Elsa took some time to consider her next words. "Do you really think them necessary?"

"Not necessarily so, no. So long as the possibility exists, however, we cannot take chances."

"Can never be too prepared, is that right?"

"Never, indeed."

"I saw the first samples that you installed. He undoubtedly did, as well."

"Good. This lowers the chances that they will become necessary."

Elsa had to give him that. "Where are these being crafted?" She asked, tapping the papers on the desk.

"In a facility a few kilometers from here. Discreetly."

"Good. Keep it so. I will not stop this, but do not overdo it."

"As you command."

"Any news from our guest, down below?"

"We may have gotten something out of him."

"Go on, then."

"A name."

"Of who? A contact?"

"The leader, supposedly."

Elsa's eyebrows rose. "It seems unlikely that he knows the true mastermind behind this."

"Yes, but he could know who he was working for by name, at least."

"Let's hear it, then."

"Ioch."

"Ioch? That's it?"

"That's all he said." He replied, nodding.

"Well, it's not much to go on, is it? I didn't even know Ioch was an actual name. Do try to get more out of him, would you?"

"As you command, my Queen."

With that said, Elsa dismissed him and the General bowed, before leaving.

After half an hour of trying to focus on paperwork and failing she gave it up as a lost cause and rose to exit her office, choosing instead to go on a walk.

Several floors below, she heard a commotion of loud noises, mostly metallic in nature, and several raised voices. Hurrying over, she poked her head in the door of what she knew was one of several armory rooms within the castle.

What she saw made her burst in a fit of unladylike giggles that, thankfully, nobody noticed.

Among a pile of fallen pikes lay Chief Hiccup, sprawled on his back and half-covered by the contents of several weapon racks. By some miracle, he was unharmed, as Ernie and the quartermaster attempted to extricate him from his predicament.

The Chief groaned, before drawling: "Don't mind me, I'm comfortable right here."

Elsa decided to enter the fray, fully stepping into the room and barely containing her mirth. "You do seem rather at ease, Chief Hiccup."

His head snapped towards her and his eyes widened, until he relaxed again and dropped his head on the floor with a defeated sigh.

"Great." He said sarcastically. "Now all that's left is for Toothless to see me like this and I will be ready to die of shame."

Elsa ignored the whining Viking, instead moving closer to Ernie, who was carefully lifting a nasty-looking pike.

"What happened?" She asked him.

"Hiccup â€| tripped?"

"No need to preserve my dignity. Go ahead and tell her I tripped over my own feet, thank you very much."

"How did this happen?" She asked, ignoring the Viking.

Since Chief Hiccup stubbornly refused to answer, Ernie took over.

"The Chief was rather enthusiastic over the chance to inspect a crossbow up close, and was not paying attention. He bumped into the rack, bringing the whole thing over."

She frowned. "Aren't those usually bolted?"

Instead of a reply, Ernie just shrugged noncommittally. Elsa shook her head. The Chief really had a gift.

After the Viking had been safely helped to his feet, he dusted himself off and tried to hide his face that was red with embarrassment, but Elsa not only noticed, but found it incredibly funny.

He brooded over her chuckling, but agreed to accompany her on a walk. Ernie respectfully left them at it, deciding to go make sure Toothless was not up to too much trouble, down in the kitchens.

Elsa lead the Chief on a small tour of the highest parts of the castle. The tallest towers, the parapets and the walls, showing him the highest view that she got to see, from the ground. Rather than be impressed at the view, the Chief gushed over the architecture of the castle, and fired off questions at her as fast as propriety allowed.

When it became apparent that Elsa had no idea what he was even talking about, never mind the ability to answer him, he started mumbling to himself and scribbling down notes on his leatherbound book while inspecting the stone walls and various decorations. Elsa let him indulge, and gently guided him to the places where she knew the architecture was particularly beautiful. At his request, they visited the Clocktower, and Elsa once again bore witness to the Chief gushing over the engineering of the thing, as well as its sheer size and taking endless notes.

Before either of them knew it, was lunch time. The Chief graciously accepted her invitation to lunch, as polite as he always had been.

Lunch had been an interesting experience, as he was still excited over their previous activities, and thus matched her sister word for word. Elsa watched them discuss and bicker with a fond smile, nibbling at her food. After a while, the Chief turned his attention to her and spoke in a much more collected and slow manner, one she was more than glad to match. His ability to adapt to his partners was worthy of praise, surely.

Court today was scheduled to start earlier, so the Chief told her that he would not fly today. She accepted this with a nod, as it wasn't really a question or anything that needed input from her.

They separated after lunch, and Elsa spent the few hours remaining until Court in limbo, busying herself around her apartments but not

really doing anything. In the end, she decided to try to read a book instead of harassing her handmaidens.

She got dressed and ready for Court, before walking there with her entourage. Like the last few times, she found the Chief in his usual spot, with the dragon once again asleep behind him. The giant reptile still commanded the attention of the entire room, but the stares were less frightened now than they were curious, evaluating.

Today's session was particularly boring, lacking any interesting or important cases. As it were, it ended even earlier than it was scheduled to, and everyone left the room looking as bored as she felt, even though the kingdom's politics took place inside this room by these people.

The Chief slipped out of the room quite swiftly, which was surprising considering the massive dragon he had to drag with him. Still, he managed it.

She had dinner with Anna and Kristoff again, and let them talk without paying much attention to them. She played with her food, staring at it but not really looking, lost in her thoughts and her boredom.

A shove woke her from the reverie, and she turned to glare at her sister "What did you do that for?"

"You were completely spaced out." Anna said with a snort. "I called your name three times. What were you thinking about?"

Well, that was embarrassing. She'd completely zoned out, it seemed. She ignored the last question. "Sorry about that." She said, before turning back to her food.

"You know," Anna started, feigning nonchalance so badly that it made Elsa want to wince, "I'm pretty sure I heard the Chief say he was going to go back to the Clocktower."

Elsa raised an eyebrow. "And why did you feel the need to tell me that?"

"Oh, nothing." Anna said, not looking at her as she picked at her food. "Just felt like sharing."

Elsa repressed the urge to roll her eyes. Her sister was as transparent as she was hopelessly optimistic.

"Your efforts are appreciated, but entirely unnecessary."

"I'm just saying, I haven't seen you actually relate to anyone besides me in â€| well, I don't remember. You're friendly with everyone, but you don't really have friends, do you?"

Elsa did not particularly want to talk about this. Her isolated upbringing and workload as Queen did not allow her the luxury of stable friendships. Anna, bless her heart, was not Queen, and thus could not hope to understand her. As Princess, she reaped all the benefits of royalty with little to no responsibilities to counterbalance it.

"Where are you going with this?"

"Nowhere, nowhere. This just seems like a good opportunity. I mean, how many people will you find about your age in a similar position to yours?"

"You'll find that the royal community does not lack for young princes and princesses."

Anna raised an eyebrow as she looked at her with skepticism. "Right, right, because that's totally the same." She said, her tone positively dripping with sarcasm. Elsa cursed her weak argument, for it gave credence to her sister's own. "I'm not interfering, as promised. Do whatever you want."

And therein lay her sister's truly devious nature. Rather than outright telling her to go and trying to convince her, she provided her with a location and just enough reasoning so that Elsa would convince herself to go.

Truly, Anna would be a frightening political force if she ever set her mind to it.

Worst of all, it had worked. Elsa excused herself, having had enough to eat, and headed outside. She pretended to not see her sister give her a very unladylike thumbs-up, silently vowing revenge.

Activity at the castle was slowing down as the night was upon them, and she walked slowly up the staircases on her way to the Clocktower.

Upon arrival, she looked around, hoping to spot the Chief. She did so a couple of minutes later, leaning against a balcony railing and taking in the view of the day's last light.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" She called as she approached. The Chief seized up, his hand immediately flying to his waist before he froze and collected himself, obviously having been startled. He straightened and turned to her, giving her a smile, before turning back towards the view.

She walked forward and leaned on the railing, next to him.

"It is." He agreed.

They both waited in silence until the sun was completely gone, before they started talking. She asked him about his interest in engineering, he asked her about her taste in literature and the arts. Conversation flowed easily, and they relocated to one of the stone benches on the wide balcony. Servants had already passed and lit up the torches, so even though the sun was gone, there was light.

An hour had easily passed, and Elsa wondered at the ease with which she discussed with the foreigner. He'd taken out the notebook at some point and was faintly drawing lines here and there as they discussed, obviously an accomplished multitasker.

"I heard a rumor." He told her at some point.

"Oh? What kind?"

"About you, actually."

"Do go on."

"They say you can sing. Quite impressively so, in fact."

Elsa groaned, holding her head in her hands.

"Who told you that?"

She could feel his smirk, even if she couldn't see it.

"I'm afraid I've been sworn to secrecy."

"It was Anna, wasn't it?"

"I cannot say. So, is it true?"

"I'm going to kill her when I get the chance."

"Focus, Queen Elsa. Is the rumor true?"

She straightened again, smoothing the wrinkles on her dress. "I suppose so. I quite enjoyed singing as a young girl, though I have fallen out of practice in recent years."

He gave her that half-smile again, before suddenly saying "Sing for me."

She blinked once, twice, processing the request. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Sing something."

"What kind of demand is that?"

He grinned. "A crazy one?"

"At the very least."

"Oh come on. When was the last time you did something crazy?"

Elsa was not impressed, and did not dignify that with a response, instead levelling a flat look his way.

He shook his head, chuckling. "It is not even a demand. I just wish to hear you singing. You do have a lovely voice. I want to judge the rumors for myself, though I do not really doubt that they are true."

Elsa was feeling strangely flattered. No one had actually asked her to sing since the death of her parents except Anna, and that was when she was trying to bring her out of her isolation. At the same time, she grew irritated. Did he have no tact, putting her on stage like that?

"As I said, I have been out of practice for a while."

"If you fear my judgment, do not. I am certain you will be terrific, but even if not, you suffered through a night of dancing with me. I'm

sure this won't be harder than that."

Elsa smiled slightly, nearly persuaded.

"I would ask for a similar favor in return, if I were to do it."

The Chief raised an eyebrow. "Trust me, singing has never been one of my strong suits."

"You are an accomplished artist in your own right, are you not? I would expect a drawing from you, in return for a song."

He smiled again. It was weird how his face looked incredibly kind, but his jagged scar always gave him a bit of a dangerous glint.

"Then it's a good thing that I'm already working on something for you."

"Truly?"

"Indeed. So, let's hear it then."

"What, you mean right now?"

"No time like the present." He replied.

She did not argue further. It made little difference if it were now or tomorrow. On second thought, now worked better for her, as they were alone and thus only the Chief would witness her embarrassment.

She rose steadily, taking a few steps forward on the balcony and turning to look out at the view of the moonlit fjord. The Viking did not move, waiting silently.

She breathed deeply for a few seconds, steadying her breathing and relaxing, releasing her anxiety to the ether and bringing the melody to the forefront of her mind. She opened her mouth, and the words flowed out, as if she were sixteen again and going over songs in the privacy of her room.

This particular song spoke of the deadly beauty of winter, and likened it to love of all kinds. Dangerous, but beautiful and with a unique charm that left everybody breathless and touched everyone, at least once in their lives.

Halfway through, she almost forgot that she was not alone, and truly got into the melody, rising in volume.

After she had ended, she eased her breathing again, closing her eyes. It felt good to sing again after so long. Liberating, in a sense.

She turned back towards her guest, and was rather pleased to see the appreciative look on his face. The Chief clapped slowly as she approached, and she laughed and did a fake bow, as if to an audience.

"That was magnificent." He said, and even she could tell that his

voice was strained.

"You exaggerate, but thank you. It felt good to sing again."

"It truly was beautiful. You should definitely sing more often."

"Perhaps." She allowed, smiling. "What about that drawing, then?"

"It's almost finished. It should be done by tomorrow."

"Great."

They spent another hour on the balcony, discussing mostly about Elsa's childhood and experiences on the castle, before they noticed that the time was growing late.

They left the Clocktower, heading down towards the Chief's own apartments at Elsa's insistence to escort him there.

Their discussion came to an end outside the Chief's door. Elsa looked at the tall man, and his casual smile brought forth one of her own.

"Thank you for the company, Queen Elsa."

"Likewise, Chief Hiccup. I will see you tomorrow."

He nodded, opening the door and slipping inside. Elsa stood outside the door for a few seconds, fighting down the unnatural urge to squeal like a fourteen year old.

Shaking her head with a fond smile, she turned and started walking away. As she did so, she heard the Chief's voice echo from inside his quarters.

"What are you doing here?"

His yell sounded frantic and surprised, so Elsa did not hesitate to turn around and march right back to the door.

"Chief Hiccup?" She asked. When she received no response, five seconds later, she clicked the knob open and entered the apartments, scanning the low-lit rooms for the Chief and flexing her arm, ready to unleash her magic in case of trouble.

She saw the Chief standing next to the opened balcony doors, outside of which the dragon Toothless lay awake. The Chief stood straight, looked incredibly flustered and held both hands behind his back.

"Is everything okay, Chief Hiccup?" She asked carefully, as she stepped further into the room, still scanning the corners for any sort of danger.

"Err ¦ yeah, everything is fine so ¦"

He did not say anything else as he noticed the incredible widening of her eyes and slackening of her jaw. There, poking over the Chief's

shoulder, was a green head of what could only be a tiny, miniature dragon.

She released an unconscious shriek as she quickly backpedaled. Her panic was mirrored in the tiny dragon as it squealed and tried to bunch itself closer to the Chief, ending up in a tiny ball held on the Chief's arms, only its head protruding as it hissed at her.

Elsa heard the hissing and saw the tiny dragon's mouth open, and did not hesitate to raise her hand draw her magic to form snow around it, ready to propel it at the tiny terror.

"Wait, stop!" The Chief's frantic yell was the only thing that stopped her from flash-freezing the beast, and she stopped all movement, turning her eyes on him, instead.

"It's okay," he said "he's not gonna hurt you. You just scared him."

"_Him_?" She repeated incredulously. The thing was too small to be like Toothless, but it must have been a dragon. It had similar build and bore leathery wings. "Who is him?"

The Chief's face darkened, his expression morphing into an ugly scowl that accentuated his scar as he all but snarled: "You could choose better instances than this to remind me of her."

"Who is- what are you even talking about?" She asked him, tone shriller than she would have liked.

He shook his head, as if to clear it of a particularly sour thought, and his dark expression vanished almost as quickly as it appeared. "It doesn't matter." She heard him mumble.

"Hiccup, what is that?" She asked, still half-ready to freeze the thing.

"I guess there's no use in it anymore. This is Frot, a Terrible Terror. We use them as messengers, sometimes. He found me."

"A dragon?" She asked, just to make certain. He nodded slowly, and it was all the reply she needed.

Rage bubbled inside her. She'd trusted him, she'd defended him, and he'd played her from the start. By god, Shad was right. The General had been right from the very beginning.

"You lied to me." She said, but ice positively sparked from her clenched fists. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the black dragon's muscles tense, watching her every move.

This prompted her to try to regain her calm, as to attack the Chief now was a terrible idea for many reasons, not the least of which being the dragon ready to pounce on her and the Chief's status as her guest.

"I never lied." He said, making her efforts not to attack him all the harder.

"How can you say that? I asked you. I asked you directly if you

knew of more dragons, and you said no!"

"I never said that." The Chief countered. "I said that Toothless is the only Night Fury I had ever seen, which is true."

She growled. "No! You don't get to excuse yourself so easily. I asked you a direct question and you deliberately duped me by using a distinction you knew I couldn't pick up on. Lying by omission is still lying!"

"Why is this even so important?"

"Why? You ask why? Can't you see that this changes everything? When did you expect to tell me? Never?"

He ignored her last few questions. "How does this change anything?"

She followed his example, and ignored his question, bringing a hand up to fist at her hair. "And you said you use some of them as messengers? How many dragons, Hiccup? Hmm?"

He did not reply, and his silence was as damning as any response.

"How many?" She insisted.

"Plenty." Came his whispered reply, his eyes downcast.

She said nothing else, only growling in anger again as she turned on her heel and strode out of the room, ignoring the Chief's sudden cry of "Elsa!" and closing the door behind her.

He did not follow her outside, and her furious pace brought her to her own apartments before she knew it. The vase at her nightstand quickly found itself in pieces all over the room, courtesy of a blast of ice from her hand.

Tantrum thrown, she struggled to bring herself to calm down. She managed it, and worked to control her breathing as she undressed. She decided that it was too early and the revelation too fresh for her to think of it carefully right now.

She laid on her bed, twisting and turning in an effort to fall asleep, which didn't come for at least some time.

In her dreams, she was attacked by many beasts of Toothless' size or bigger. They all had his form, but were of various colors. She worked desperately to freeze them before they got to her, but even if she frozen them by the dozens, they were too many and soon she was surrounded, jaws stretching open all around her and ready to snap shut andâ€"

She woke with a start, feeling the sweat from her nightmare rolling off of her brow and making her nightgown cling to her body. She calmed herself and went about her morning routine.

Morning brought with it a new sense of clarity and distance from last night's revelation, and she was able to look past the sting of the Chief's lies to look at the bigger picture. She was quiet and

speculative throughout breakfast, to which the Viking did not dare show his face.

Anna noticed her somber mood and tried to ask her what was wrong, but Elsa gave her noncommittal answers and went back to thinking, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Later, when she was in her office, the door was knocked and one of her guards announced that the Viking Chief was asking permission to see her. She allowed it with a curt nod, and the guard bowed, before stepping aside and allowing the Viking entry. He wore a blue tunic today, a rather simple one.

He looked troubled, but collected. Good. There was no room in this for hysterics like hers from last night, or desperate mumbling like his own.

The door closed behind him, but he still did not move any closer.

"Come inside," She urged him coolly, "take a seat."

He did so, walking slowly and sitting down on the chair in front of her desk. Still, he said nothing.

"I apologize for storming off last night." She began, though her look was as cold as the ice she could so easily summon. "It was juvenile and immature, and we are not teenagers."

He nodded absently, knowing that this was not even close to the true purpose of their meeting.

"Will you listen to what I have to say?" he asked, his voice uncharacteristically low.

She nodded. "I will."

Even so, he did not speak. Elsa waited, but the Chief seemed lost in his thoughts, or maybe unsure how to begin.

Well, she would help him.

"You lied to me." She echoed her words again, though this time she was calm as she said it. He flinched as if struck, but did not deny it.

"Yes." He said. Still, he did not elaborate.

"Why?" She asked.

He took some time to think, but Elsa said no more. He would reply, or he would leave.

"Why shouldn't I have? What did I owe you, when we first met? What reason did I have to trust you with that information?"

All good points, Elsa had to agree. When she'd asked him that, it hadn't even been a day since they'd been in a deadly battle, one that her own soldiers had initiated. It was a good excuse, and would have worked for anyone else, but not him.

She narrowed her eyes. "Is that it?"

He opened his mouth to say something but closed it again. Elsa gave him his time.

"I do not divulge the fact if I can help it. It wasn't you, personally. It is my policy."

She could accept this, as well. People with responsibility always had to make tough calls. She did, too. Still, she had an advantage and she'd be damned before she let it go so easily.

"So you're telling me that you lied to me because of policy?"

His eyes narrowed and he raised his head to look at her.

"They're dragons, Queen Elsa. Look me in the eye and tell me you would not have done the same, in my position."

Unlike him, she would not lie, so she did not say that. Instead, she shook her head.

"But that's the thing, Chief Hiccup. I'm not in your position. You are, and you are the one who lied."

"That is true." He allowed. "Should I start packing my belongings, then?"

She frowned. Was that what he thought? That she was sending him away?

"You are a guest here. Your status as such has not changed."

His brow furrowed in confusion.

"But .. why not?"

In truth, Elsa could not, in good conscience, send him away because of this. The original reason why he had to be here still stood, and the fact of the matter was that she understood why he'd lied. It stung a lot on a personal level because she really had come to trust him, but as a Queen, she could understand and even support his logic. No, she could not hold this against him and not call herself a hypocrite.

"Just â€| answer me something, would you?"

He nodded. "If I can?"

"Why?" She asked. "This policy of secrecy, why?"

His eyes darkened, and he crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"It wasn't always this way." He said. "I used to not care who knew about the dragons. In fact, I welcomed them, trying to teach people what I knew and to make them understand."

Elsa sensed a huge 'but' coming. She did not speak.

"You ask me why I lie? Why I do not tell everyone I meet the truth about dragons?" He asked her, and she nodded.

"Because the last time I did so, my stupidity sparked a terrible war."

Elsa's breath hitched on her chest. "Your father?"

He nodded, still frowning darkly. "Among many other good people, my father perished on that war. I have since learned to keep my trap shut."

"I | I see."

And really, what could she say to that? Her indignation felt shallow in the wake of this revelation. She did not dismiss it, but neither did she condemn the Chief for his choice.

"You said the tiny dragon was a messenger, correct?" She asked, instead. He nodded.

"Yes. It took him a while to follow my trail through the blizzards, but he managed it."

"Is it from Berk?"

"It is. I suppose that since I am not leaving, I should talk with you about the contents of the letter."

"Go on."

"It is from one of my officers from back home. She has made known her desire to find and visit me, though stressing that it should be her to come to me and not the other way around. I would seek your permission to send her directions that will lead her here."

Elsa took some time to think about this. "Will she come with a dragon?"

"Yes, she will."

"And this does not bother you? Then the knowledge that you work so hard to hide will become common."

He frowned. "That is true, but it is not as bad as I originally thought. I don't see how that knowledge could hurt, exactly, in this part of the world. Things have changed since | the war. History would not repeat itself so easily."

"Can't hurt, you say | is that because there are no dragons here?"

"I'm | not so sure about that."

"What do you mean?"

"I have seen | some weird signs, in the mountains."

"Of dragon presence?"

"Perhaps. It's nothing to be sure of, but it merits further investigation. Regardless, there is little way the kingdoms here could use what little I have shown against us."

"If you're sure." She allowed. "When will she arrive?"

"If I send the message today, in about eight days, give or take a couple."

"Alright. Do so, then."

"Will that be all?"

"It will."

He hesitated before speaking again. "So ~~we~~ are we ~~we~~ are we good?"

She looked him in the eye for a few seconds, before nodding slowly. The Chief rose, inclined his head, and turned to leave. He threw her one last glance over his shoulder before the door closed.

Elsa slumped back on her chair. Were they good? She did not know. On one hand, she could follow and understand the Chief's reasoning for lying to her. On the other hand, no matter the reasons, it still left the fact that he had lied to her. Elsa was not in a position to take deceiving her to her face lying down. She was Queen, and she had responsibilities to her kingdom and her people. They came first, and they would always come first.

With a sudden clarity, she realized that same was true for Chief Hiccup. He did not mean to offend her, but to him his people would always come first. If it meant lying to her face, he would do it. If she judged by her own standards, then there would be little that the Chief would not do if he deemed them necessary for the good of his tribe.

She cursed herself. She had silently mocked Ernie for befriending Hiccup and failing his duty, but she had not realized that she had done the exact same thing. Like him, she had been blinded by who Hiccup was as a person—gracious, kind, funny, confident, polite—and forgot that the important thing was what he was. And what he was, was Chief of the Vikings of Berk. He had responsibility only to his people, not to her or Ernie or anyone else.

Because she enjoyed his company in the last few days she had come to trust the man, forgetting the status of either of them in the process.

A dangerous mistake in more ways than one.

~E~

* * *

><p> h) Notice me, reviewer-senpai ...

****Disclaimer:** **I do not own the HTTYD characters, places and situations that you recognize. I do not own the cameo character, either.

****Acknowledgements**:** As always, respect, love and reverence to the Lady Sorrows, AKA Yes Miss Lady. Further acknowledgement goes to Katarina Aguilar, the mass anonymous reviewer. I love you, Katarina, and so do many other people. Life is full of wonders and, occasionally, good fanfiction. Understand this and do not do anything rash.

Last, to my reviewers, all of you sexy people. I don't know when I would have updated if you didn't keep reminding me, but it probably wouldn't have been this soon. Thank you.

****Notes**:**

****a)**** Hey. Here we are again, two summer jobs, one commissioned original work, two girlfriends, one new PS3 MMO(Destiny), one new university and one new house later. Back from summer break! It was a pretty busy one.

****b)**** I finally saw HTTYD 2. Mixed feelings over it. Hiccup's mother annoyed me just as much as I thought she would, and the plot in general was all over the place once I stopped to consider it, but (and this is a very big but) none of that matters because Hiccup is so. Damn. Awesome. Very rarely is a character enough to carry an otherwise bad movie, but this guy ... damn. All in all, the movie was worse than the original, but Hiccup got an 10x awesomeness multiplier.

Also regarding HTTYD 2, it made me ship Hiccup/Astrid even harder than before. I've always supported them, and the movie only strengthened it.

And, last but certainly not least, I was surprised to realise that I can fit HTTYD 2 in my headcanon for this story. So, rejoice! The only part my story clashed on with canon is the date of Valka's disappearance, and I might just go back and retcon that since it's only mentioned once in my fic.

****c)**** I am not at all happy with this chapter. It seemed much better in my head. Regardless, this is how I had planned the story to progress, so this is how it's going to be.

* * *

><p>~H~
>A Chance Encounter, Chapter 9

>~H~

* * *

><p>Hiccup thought it prudent, in light of his recent falling-out with the Queen, to not join her and her sister for breakfast. Rather, he had Ernie bring him breakfast and he ate with Toothless. There was a lot to be done, and a lot that had been done to be processed.<p>

Their fight, whilst unexpected, did not entirely ruin his plans. Yes, losing her trust was a blow that would smart for a while, but it did, if indirectly, help advance his goals. In finding out that there were more dragons, it opened the field for him. Rather than deny his overeager friend, he could allow her to visit him, and in the process reveal Berk's might to this corner of the world.

He'd been hesitant, of course. Revealing the dragons on his own terms had been the original goal of his trip south, but the hesitation, born of a war that still plagued his dreams and thoughts, stayed his hands. Now the choice had been made and it was not his, yet it was the one he was supposed to take. In a way, this outcome of events relieved him. Now, there was no turning back.

He'd already sent Frot with his positive reply yesterday. He expected the little terror to reach Berk in four days, three if the weather was on his side. Gods willing, he was expecting her at the end of the week.

Hiccup smiled. He hadn't seen his blonde-haired friend in a while, and her aggressive attitude never ceased to cheer him up.

"It's gonna be fun to have her with us, won't it, Toothless?" He asked his dragon companion. "Just like old times, eh?"

Toothless raised his maw from his breakfast and let out an excited warble, clearly just as excited as he was to see a familiar face.

Still, that was a few days away. He still had things to do here. There was the Queen's map to finish-a fine challenge that he had foolishly jumped headfirst into-, the Queen's portrait that was almost finished, and his own personal projects. Projects that included copies of the amazing crossbow design, with his personal flair, of course, or further scouting of the countryside and the castle's newfound aerial defences.

The new ballistas were crude, and if asked Hiccup would've had several suggestions, but they would work. The message was clear.

He kept Toothless company for a while, before bidding his friend goodbye and leaving their quarters, leaving the reptile to sleep once again.

Today, he had planned to hole himself in the public Library and find out what he could. To his annoyance, whilst Arendelle and Berk shared a common language, Arendelle's alphabet was entirely different, making Elsa's extensive collection frustratingly inaccessible. Still, Ernie was there to help him and had done so since his arrival in the city, and the letters were not particularly hard. He'd already reached a point where he could translate simple texts and contextually understand more complicated ones. The Librarian was appreciative of his curiosity and helped him find everything he needed.

The reason for his visit to the Library was two-fold. One, history. He wanted to learn the history of Arendelle. Fascinating to be sure, especially the legend of its founding by Elsa's ancestor, who was said to be in possession of ice powers, himself. It was more of a

fairy tale than a historical account, but with Queen Elsa displaying the same alleged skillset, some semblance of truth could not be discounted.

Second, and more boring, were laws. He wanted to find out everything he could about Arendelle's justice system, for that was the system that truly controlled how a country worked. Though infinitely less fascinating, it sparked its own kind of interest. The justice system was a collection of legislations and directives, some of which were drafted a few months ago, while others dated back to Arendelle's founding. There was no body of people that drafted the laws or vetoed them. Rather, a select few individuals had the ability to draft or repeal them.

Perhaps most interesting of all his finds, was an addition made by the Commander General regarding succession. The date matched the historical day of the announcement of the deaths of Elsa's parents, and it directed that should Elsa herself pass away, the crown would pass to the Commander General rather than princess Anna, until such a time as the princess was judged fit to lead.

That made Hiccup frown as he read the passage, and he contemplated it for some time. It did not fall to him to judge another country's laws or its lawmakers, but such an order did not sit well with him. No man should be given the power to legally place himself in a position of succession preceding that of the Royal Family.

Still, he was here to learn, not to challenge Arendelle's legalities. He made a note of the passage and continued his reading.

He was roused from his research by Ernie, who informed him that Court would begin soon. Hiccup was rather startled, he hadn't noticed time passing so quickly.

"Perhaps you'd like to eat something before attending Court, seeing as you have already passed over lunch?"

With a jolt, Hiccup realized that he was starving; he gratefully accepted the young servant's offer.

Ernie led him to a spacious room near the kitchens, where a small table was set in one side while the rest of it was empty, cleared to fit his dragon companion.

Hiccup pulled up a chair, and almost attacked the meaty stew placed in front of him. He really didn't appreciate Ernie enough; the young man had eased his stay in the castle in a hundred small unobtrusive ways. Guiltily he realised he knew very little about him. Between bites he attempted to engage him in conversation.

"Say, Ernie, where are you from?"

"Excuse me?"

"I realized recently that you've told me all about your work in the castle, but little about you, personally. Did you always live in the castle? Do you have a family? A girlfriend? A pet?"

"Ahem." Ernie cleared his throat, cheeks red with the embarrassment of being put under scrutiny, momentarily losing his characteristic

stoicism.

>"Well, since you asked, I see no harm in telling you. No, I didn't always live in the castle. I come from a province on the far end of Arendelle, near the borders. My parents gave me to the castle's service at the age of five, in exchange for livestock and tools."<p>

Hiccup's eyes widened, and he was thankful he hadn't been trying to swallow anything.

"You were sold?"

Ernie frowned. "I suppose that's one way of putting it, if you choose to see it like that."

"How else could I see it? You're telling me you're basically a slave?"

"It's not as bad as you make it sound, you know."

Hiccup did try to calm himself, he really did. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and allowed his anger to cool. He obviously didn't see the whole picture here, so he shouldn't jump to conclusions and wrath. Still, he'd fought very hard to make sure dragons were not treated as slaves. He hated human slavery just as much, if not more.

"I'm sorry Ernie, I didn't mean to judge so quickly. Why don't you go ahead and explain, yeah?"

"My parents are farmers, in a very rocky and mountainous part of the kingdom. The labor is hard, and the weather conditions are oftentimes extreme. They themselves were very poor and their equipment in disrepair. They knew no letters to teach me. All in all, when the opportunity presented itself to have me sent to the castle, to be educated and clothed and fed, they jumped at it. The things they got in return were just a bonus."

"Okay, it does sound better when you're saying it." Hiccup said.

"Have you spoken to them since?"

"I â€| have. Once, some years ago."

Hiccup frowned. "Why just once?"

"It's pretty far away, and the journey is perilous and long. It is â€| inadvisable."

"I see." Hiccup scratched his chin, feeling fresh stubble there. Perhaps he'd be able to help his new friend somehow, after all.

"Any siblings?"

"None. And before you ask, my schedule is too busy to allow for a relationship of the româ- no, stop. I know what that smile means. Don't even think about it."

Hiccup grinned further. "I swear I'm not thinking what you think I'm thinking."

"Yes you are. Stop."

Hiccup raised his arms in surrender. "Fine, fine. Your choice."

"Thank you."

"Having said that, you did see that look that serving girl threw you, right?"

"Hiccup!"

~H~

After the early dinner, Hiccup once again attended Court. It was interesting to see how the Queen asserted her power. After a few days watching, he was beginning to form a concrete opinion of her. She did not even glance his way, which he thought was rather deliberate. It hurt his pride a little bit, but he had expected something like that, so he wasn't too surprised.

The next day, he spent most of his morning completing the Queen's portrait. He and Toothless spent most of the day lounging in the Gardens, as Toothless groomed himself and Hiccup lay against his side and drew. What started off as a simple sketch turned, at her encouragement, into a full-out drawing. Though he never worked with colors, he thought that it was still good. The original sketch, done on his notebook, was redrawn in a bigger version in tough paper, provided to him by Ernie.

By the evening, even the finishing touches were done. He put on a simple white tunic and went searching for the Queen. Hopefully he'd manage to fix the only hurdle that'd occurred so far and get the Queen to at least friendly again.

Not having seen her anywhere in or around the gardens, he decided to head straight for her office. He let the guard announce him, and counted the minutes until he was allowed in. Six and a half. Not long enough to be insulting, but long enough to leave an impression.

He entered her office, gingerly carrying his covered drawing. The Queen was, as always, sitting on her chair, green gown flowing around her and hair caught in a stylish ponytail. She regarded him stoically; her gaze so icy Hiccup wondered whether she was using her powers.

"Greetings, Queen Elsa."

"Chief Haddock." She greeted with a tiny nod, before asking pointedly: "I do not recall an appointment with you, or having asked for you."

Ouch. She pulled no punches.

"Indeed you have not. Perhaps, if you are not too busy, you could spare a few minutes for me?" He punctuated his words with a slight smile.

Maybe she was moved, maybe she simply didn't want to argue, but she agreed.

"I have two things I want to discuss."

"First, I would like your permission to take Ernie to visit his parents."

The Queen's raised eyebrows revealed her surprise, but her face did not otherwise move.

"So he has shared his story with you, that's nice. Still, the journey is a long and dangerous one. Ernie cannot be missing for long without having scheduled it beforehand. For that matter, neither should you."

"If Ernie described it correctly, his parent's village is only a few hours of flight time away."

She was silent for a few seconds. "You want to \rightarrow take Ernie on the dragon? With you?"

Did she doubt his word?

"Of course. Ernie's a good kid, he deserves to see his family more often. If we go tomorrow morning, we'll be back by dinnertime."

"And why did you feel the need to ask me? Madam Gertrude is in charge of all the staff."

Hiccup shrugged his shoulders. "I wanted to run it by you, first, in case you had objections."

"Why would I have objections?"

Hiccup levelled her with a look.

"You don't like Toothless at all."

The Queen opened her mouth, probably to deny it, but then stopped. Hiccup watched her, fascinated as her expression shifted.

"No, not yet." She admitted. "Thank you for asking for my input. However, I trust you to control your dragon, who in turn seems to like Ernie well enough. If Ernie chooses to, you can have the next day for your visit. I won't stop him."

"My thanks, Queen Elsa."

"Now, as for the second reason of your little visit, I assume it has to do with that thing you're carrying?"

Hiccup scoffed. "Please don't call it a _thing_."

"Well, can I see it? I assume it's a drawing of some sort? Is it the map?"

"No, it's not the map. It is, however, something you asked for."

She raised an inquisitive eyebrow, but Hiccup only smiled lightly, giving her time to figure it out and relishing the slight widening of her eyes and the tightening of her lips.

"I see. So, you still consider our deal to be valid."

"I don't see why not. You sang for me, and it was beautiful. The least I could do was give you what you asked for. I only hope you don't have terribly high expectations."

She waved her hand at his words.

"Nonsense, I'm sure it's great. Well, the suspense is killing me. Can I see it?" As she said this, she rose from her chair and walked around her desk, coming closer. If her expression was not so controlled, Hiccup would have said she looked almost eager.

Hiccup brought the covered sketch in front of him, and dramatically held his hand over it. It earned him an annoyed look from the Queen. He chuckled, and drew back the fabric, revealing the sketch underneath.

Made entirely out of black ink, it depicted the Queen herself, from the shoulders up. Her hair was caught in its characteristic braid, and the Queen's expression was neutral, though pleasantly so. Hiccup had sort of rushed through this, but he thought he'd done a pretty good job. He usually drew sketches of machinery, buildings, or landscapes, but he had tried his hand at people before, and he wasn't too bad.

The Queen seemed to think so, too, if the appreciative-and completely out of character- whistle that escaped her was any indication.

"Did you draw this?" She asked before she could stop herself. "Silly question," she immediately amended "of course you drew it. It's lovely, actually. Thank you."

Hiccup honestly wasn't expecting such high praise, and found himself a little uncomfortable. Still, he did his best to hide it.

"It was nothing. Took me just two days to draw and ink. It could have been much better."

The Queen ignored him, instead choosing to approach further and extend her hands, as if to take hold of the painting. She stopped herself and looked at him.

"May I?" She asked. Hiccup nodded, and passed her the painting. She held it gingerly, as if it might break, and brought it up to eye level.

"The resemblance is staggering." She murmured.

"Well, it is meant to be you. I should hope it resembles you."

"Stop trying to be clever. You know what I meant."

Hiccup did not reply, and she lowered the painting, so that she could look at him.

"Thank you for this."

"It was only fair. One for one, as they say."

"A couple minutes of singing hardly seem equal to the hours of work you must have put into this."

"Then, perhaps, you could sing for me once more?" Hiccup asked, hopeful beyond reason.

The Queen opened her mouth to reply, but stopped before she made a sound. Hiccup could almost see the thoughts in her head, as she replayed their latest argument in her mind, and probably reminded herself that he wasn't to be trusted or to be friends with. Her excited smile melted, giving way to that carefully controlled, neutral expression.

Blast it! He had pushed her too fast.

"Perhaps." She replied, noncommittally. "Regardless, this is a great gift. I will hold it in my chambers. Thank you, again."

Hiccup could tell a dismissal when he was issued one.

"Queen Elsa." He said, nodding his head respectfully.

"I shall see you at Court." She said, and he nodded once more, before turning and leaving.

As he walked, he felt a strange mix of relief and disappointment. On one hand, she'd been friendly with him again, if only for a few seconds. On the other, it was clear she did not intend to forgive or forget easily. Still he felt that his peace offering had been appreciated for what it was, if not entirely successful.

Well, prior experience with females had not given him the impression that they made anything easy.

The rest of the day passed without anything of note. He attended Court, and put to Ernie his idea of visiting his parents by dragonback. The servant was surprised to say the least, but after Hiccup explained the ease and speed of dragon travel, Ernie accepted with what seemed as a mixture of gratefulness and trepidation.

>Hiccup was somewhat surprised at Ernie's easy acceptance, he'd of thought the young man would need some convincing of the safety of dragon flight. However, the young man seemed to trust him and Toothless enough to fly with them for the first time. An honor, in a way.<p>

That night, as he lay on the large overly soft bed, trying to sleep, he thought of Berk. He'd missed his home. Yes, he often traveled, but his heart would always belong to Berk and its people. Arendelle â€‘ it was beautiful and new and exciting, but he could feel Berk calling him back, stronger every day.

He looked at the empty space next to him. The huge bed was too much for one person. If only â€‘

Hiccup sighed, and cut that thought off before it even started. No. There was no point dwelling on that right now. He'd only make his life harder. He shut his eyes tighter and resolved to sleep. Several minutes later, he fell into a fitful slumber that had him tossing and

turning all night.

The next day, he and Ernie had their breakfast with Toothless. Ernie was, for once, not wearing his servant uniform. As per Hiccup's instructions, he'd opted for leather clothes that covered him almost completely, and held a fur coat that he would wear just before they were airborne. Hiccup may not much mind the cold, but for someone unused the high altitude and the speed of dragon travel could be freezing. This would be doubly so when traversing the frozen peaks that lay between them and their destination.

A couple of hours after breakfast, it was time to go. Hiccup had made a few adjustments to his harness, to ensure that Ernie would not fall. As his first ever flight was going to be several hours long, he could not be trusted to not simply slacken his grip and fall, so a rider harness was advisable.

Hiccup and Toothless, both fully equipped, made their way towards the Courtyard. People in the castle had gotten somewhat used to them by now, so they received bows and nods of respect, and very few fearful looks. Progress, if nothing else.

Ernie was waiting for them, a small pack next to him and fur coat in hand, audibly nervous. Hiccup had never seen the young man this unnerved before.

"Hey Ernie." He greeted as soon as they reached him. Ernie did not reply, instead looking at Toothless with wide eyes, as if seeing him for the first time. Toothless, for his part, snorted in amusement before bumping his head at Ernie's chest. That seemed to snap the young man off his funk, for he reached with his hand to rub at the dragon's head.

"You have to relax, buddy." Hiccup said. "It's gonna be alright. Everything will be fine."

"Yes." Ernie said, obviously trying to convince himself. "You're right. So, how do we do this?"

"Well, you'll climb first so I can help you. You've ridden horses before, and though I hate myself for making the parallel, the part about climbing and sitting is very similar. So, hop on, and I'll guide you through the rest."

He mounted easily enough and fit on the space behind Hiccup's own seat. Hiccup carefully latched his harness to the saddle and explained that these were just precautions, and showed him how to wrap his legs around strings of leather belts for extra stabilityty. Once he was sure Ernie was well situated, he climbed to his spot.

"Hold on tight." He cautioned, and felt Ernie's hands squeezee around him. Good. "Toothless, let's go."

This time, their take-off was slow and methodical rather than their high speed jumps. Those kinds of stunts were inadvisable while carrying extra passengers, especially ones that weren't used to flying.

As Toothless rose with steady beats of his strong wings, Ernie

gingerly extracted one of his hands and waved to the crowd that had gathered in the Courtyard. Hiccup's eyes roamed and he smiled at the princess that was waving excitedly up at them from below.

As they rose higher, his eyes caught the glint of something from one of the castle's higher windows. He looked that way, and he could, if barely, make out a form on the window. The sun again glinted against what he presumed was a circlet, and he waved once.

Judging this to be an appropriate height, Toothless took off. Eerie squeaked and clamped his arms around Hiccup's torso. Hiccup chuckled as Toothless extended his wings and glided on the thermals created by the city below.

"Have a look Ernie, its Arendelle as you've never seen her before."

Slowly, Ernie's grip loosened, and his head lifted itself from between Hiccup's shoulder blades. Even over the noise of the wind Hiccup heard a gasp from behind him. He admitted it was an impressive sight, even for one used to being hundreds of feet in the air. Arendelle lay spread out beneath them in the morning sunlight, gleaming by the turquoise ocean like a jewel dropped by some errant giantess. The great three masted ships in the harbour looked like toys, the castle itself like a princess's plaything. Hiccup craned his neck to catch the amazed look on Ernie's face as he surveyed the scene below.

"It'sâ€| its magnificent," he finally managed "itsâ€| its-why do you ever put your feet on the ground when the sky is so available to you?"

"Ha! You'll realise in an hour or two why I come down to earth!" Hiccup laughed heartily, taking enormous pleasure in Ernie's wide eyed grin as he looked all about. "Want to see what the top of the clouds look like?"

Toothless lazily curved around to the west, leaving the sea and the city behind them. They travelled slower than the pair was used to, but Hiccup had accounted for this and they were making good time. Three hours later, they were almost there. After a lot of needling on Hiccup's part, Ernie had finally admitted that he was cramped all over his body, after insisting again and again that he was fine.

Ernie had planned the route and easily recognized the correct village from above. Thankfully, the weather was fair. Hiccup stayed on the clouds, not wanting to panic the people below. They landed among the nearby woods, and Hiccup gingerly helped Ernie dismount. He fell heavily to the earth, almost painfully, and immediately started groaning in pain due to all his cramps.

"Yeah. That happens." Hiccup said sympathetically.

Once Ernie was feeling better, he removed the flying gear from himself and the two of them set off, leaving Toothless to wait for them in the clearing.

Ernie led him to the house of his parents in silence, and Hiccup could understand the young man's nervousness at seeing his parents

after so many years. The house was wooden, and relatively small. Nearby was a barn, with tools and a couple of half-filled carts strewn about.

They reached the door, and Ernie raised his hand to knock, before suddenly freezing. He was obviously fighting with himself.

"It's kinda cold out here, Ernie." Hiccup said, though he wasn't at all bothered by the temperature. "We should probably head inside."

Ernie nodded, and audibly swallowed. His hand rapped on the door once, twice.

Commotion from inside, heavy steps on wooden floor.

"Yes? Who is it?" A woman's voice called from inside, though it sounded muffled, as if from faraway. Hiccup thought that she was probably in a different room.

"It's—" Ernie began, but his voice broke. He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. "It's Arnold, I've come to visit."

Silence from inside for a few seconds. Then, they heard a bang as something metallic hit the wood and steps came rushing up to the door.

The wooden door opened quickly, revealing a disheveled woman, perhaps around her fifties. Her black hair, unkempt and barely held by a small band, were graying at the temples. Her eyes were as wide as saucers as she stared at Ernie open-mouthed.

"A- â€œ Arnod?" She whispered, as if not believing it, herself. Ernie smiled.

"Hello mother."

Ernie's mother had tears in her eyes as she rushed and enveloped the much taller boy in a bone-crushing hug. She laughed manically as her hands roamed all over Ernie's back, as if making sure that he was actually real. Ernie was hugging back, his own eyes watering.

"Oh my Arnod!"

"Sarah?" Called a masculine voice from further inside the room. A man showed up from further inside, dressed in heavy furs and holding an axe. He was boasting a pretty impressive mustache, but his head was otherwise bald. He was tall, almost as tall as Hiccup himself, though much broader.

As soon as he saw the boy enveloped in his wife's arms, the axe slid off his fingers and clanged against the floor.

"Hello father." Ernie said, smiling nervously over his mother's shoulder.

Ernie's father reached them in three long strides and enveloped the both of them in his long arms.

Hiccup was feeling rather uncomfortable. He felt like he was

intruding in something inherently private. He had to fight the urge to fidget with his hands, or constantly shift his weight.

A minute of fierce hugging later, the three disentangled so that Ernie's mother could grasp her son's face and inspect him.

"My," she said, "look how you've grown!"

"A right man now, ye are." His father said unsteadily, looking his full grown son up and down. Then, he finally registered Hiccup's presence. The Viking gave him a smile and a respectful bow of his head.

"An' who's this here fine lad, my son?"

Ernie look from his parents to Hiccup, and extended his hand. Hiccup approached, enough so that Ernie rested his hand on Hiccup's shoulder.

"Mother, father; this here is Lord Hiccup Haddock, and he is the one who made my visit possible."

"Just Hiccup, please." He said hastily. "It is a pleasure to meet both of you, Master Sherner, Madam Sherner."

"Nonsense, dear." Ernie's mother said. "Please call me Sarah. And this is my husband, Bermount."

Ernie's father looked a little uneasy at the mention of his rank; he bowed ungracefully in his general direction "Thank you for this, milord. You brought our son to us, and we are grateful." He said with guarded sincerity.

"Please, there's no need for formalities." Hiccup said firmly.

"I think you will find that Hiccup here is no stickler for ranks and titles." Ernie added.

"That so?" Sarah replied, smiling widely. "Then let me show you a mother's gratitude, young man. Come'ere!"

Before Hiccup knew it, he was the recipient of the same hug he'd witnessed earlier. It was as painful as it had looked, and his lungs emptied of air forcefully.

"Let the lad breathe, Sarah." Bermount said relaxing a little. Sarah squeezed him one last time, looking up at him with teary eyes, before mumbling an apology and pulling back, wiping at her eyes.

"Why don't the both of you come in?" She said. "I was just making lunch. You can tell me everything over some food."

The Sherners' house was small, but homely. The wooden structure reminded Hiccup of Berk's houses, and the hot stew could have just as easily been from the Mess Hall.

Ernie and his family talked incessantly over lunch, with the occasional word from Hiccup. He explained that he was a foreign official who'd made fast friends with Ernie and he'd arranged for their transport here on his fastest horses. He thought it prudent not

to mention Toothless, or dragons in general, not really wanting to spoil the happy moment by explaining facts about dragon nature and differentiating them from myth. Mostly, however, it was Ernie doing the talking.

Hiccup had never seen Ernie so happy. His face shone when he talked to his parents, hesitantly and awkwardly to start with but as the evening drew in he talked and laughed freely, all the restrictions and rules that he'd lived by for years thrown out the window. It warmed him inside, and assured him that he'd been right to bring him here.

After eating, they'd moved next to the lit fireplace. The hours passed surprisingly fast, and the next time that Hiccup looked out the window, it was getting dark.

"We can't go back now." he announced. He would not risk trying to navigate back to Arendelle after dark whilst carrying Ernie.

This was taken as rather good news by Ernie's parents, and even Ernie seemed to not mind that he'd basically overstepped his boundaries by not being back at the agreed upon time. They decided to leave at dawn.

Hiccup heard more about Ernie's family, as they related half a lifetime of family news, about what they did and what their life was like before and after giving Ernie away. Sarah made some sweets that she passed around. As they were quite delicious, Hiccup carefully swiped one and put it in his pocket, certain that Toothless would appreciate it.

Ernie's old attic room had another use now, but his bed was still there, for reasons that Hiccup did not want to think about.

Regardless, that meant that Ernie slept in his old room, and Hiccup bunked in the-surprisingly comfortable-couch over by the fireplace. After assuring Ernie's parents that no, he did not want their bed, that yes he perfectly fine in the couch and that yes, he'd slept at far worse places, they accepted it, even if they were not satisfied.

The separation, when dawn arrived, was quite heartfelt and tearful. Since Hiccup would be inevitable leaving, Ernie did not know when he'd be able to return, so it was goodbye all over again. Hiccup made sure to say goodbye first and moved away towards the woods, leaving the family to say their farewells in privacy.

When Ernie found him in the clearing, he was still crying. Hiccup refrained from commenting on it. Instead, he held up the sweet he'd swiped and offered it to Ernie, nodding his head in Toothless' direction. Ernie let out a ragged laugh, and procured an identical sweet from his own pocket. Hiccup snorted, and both fed their sweets to Toothless, who was happy to receive them and pretty vocal in his gratitude.

The flight back was hurried, as they were late, but felt much lighter. Hiccup could tell that Ernie was still high on emotions, so they didn't talk much, but the young man seemed much happier and infinitely less nervous than on the way there.

They arrived to little fanfare, as people were only just beginning to

wake up and get to work. Hiccup looked up to the same window again, but the sun was not at the right way for him to make out anything.

Ernie thanked him profusely once again and hurried away, no doubt to change and go apologise to his superiors for being late. Hiccup yawned, still a little sleepy. He and Toothless went to their quarters, where Hiccup freed the both of them of their riding gear, and stretched, letting out a loud groan.

"What do you wanna do now, bud? Sleep?" Toothless, who had been licking the soft membrane of his wing, looked at him, shook his head once, then snorted.

"Yeah, I'm not feeling much like it either. Wanna go to the Gardens?"

Another snort.

"Let's go then. Let me just grab my notebook."

Notebook and pencil in hand, he opened the doors for Toothless and followed him outside. They strolled casually through the hallways until they exited the castle and arrived in the Gardens. There, they lay down next to a pond. Toothless lazily waved his tail this way and that inside the water while Hiccup rested his back against his side and sketched or wrote. For some reason, nothing he did seemed good enough. His frown got worse and worse as he kept starting the same sketch over and over again.

Eventually, he tore out the page he was using and bunched it up, before throwing it away with all his might. Toothless stopped what he was doing-licking the base of his neck-to look at his friend inquisitively. The dragon let out a low warble, questioning tone evident. Hiccup just shook his head.

"Sorry bud. I'm just so tense right now, for some reason."

Toothless warbled again, and though Hiccup could not understand him, he appreciated his friend's effort. He felt the dragon nudge him with his head.

"You're right, bud. I gotta go let off some steam."

He rose swiftly, decision taken. He looked at Toothless, who seemed about ready to take a nap.

"What about you? You gonna stay here or come with me?"

Toothless let out a snort, closed his eyes, and rested his head on his crossed forelegs. Hiccup shook his head, before turning to leave.

"Lazy, good for nothing lizard."

He had the good sense to duck the tail strike.

He headed for his rooms first, to retrieve his gear and his weapons. He wanted to practice his sword and dagger forms as well as archery, this time. With that in mind, he wore his armor, strapped on his

sword and quiver to his hips, passed his bow over his shoulder and fit his dagger into the fold between his armor and his back, where it was barely visible but could be retrieved easily. He didn't bother taking the helmet.

He made his way to the barracks, nodding to people he knew along the way. To some satisfaction, some people gave him weary and even fearful looks. It probably wasn't the weapons themselves, as these people lived in a castle with a full garrison, but how foreign his whole ensemble looked. Still, no one on Berk was ever intimidated by his appearance, so he resolved to enjoy it while it lasted.

He didn't see any of the friends he had made over by the practise range. That was unfortunate, but fine. He recognized plenty of the soldiers, and greeted them accordingly. He set himself up on a wooden table, placing his pack and bow there but keeping the rest of the weapons on his person. It would be good to practise while fully armored, more realistic.

After warming up sufficiently, he began going through his sword forms. Smoker fit in his hand as perfectly as when he'd first made it, and though never his first weapon of choice, he tried to keep himself adequately skilled with it. Of course, no amount of practise beat having a sparring partner, but he didn't know any of the soldiers around that well to go up to one and ask them.

He kept it up for roughly an hour, before taking a break, having tired himself out. His armor was light and Smoker lighter than most swords of its size, but even so, constant sword practise could tire out anyone.

After a break, he switched to archery. He picked a decent enough distance, one where he had to keep wind and trajectory well in mind but didn't require minutes of calculations, and began practising. His archery was his most proficient form of offense, a necessary development when most of his fighting was done atop Toothless, so he had to stay in top form.

He kept that up for some time, pausing only so that he could retrieve his arrows, lest they damage each other.

"Back again, I see."

Hiccup was so startled by the voice that his concentration broke, his hands moved as if by themselves, and the arrow he was preparing to shoot flew up and over the wall of the practise range. A beam of frost stopped the arrow in its tracks suddenly, and Hiccup let of a sigh of relief. If the arrow had gone unchecked, perhaps it would have hit someone beyond the wall.

He turned to face the cause of his miss, narrowing his eyes at the Queen, who had a slightly sheepish expression on her face.

"That was dangerous."

"In hindsight, perhaps I should have announced myself a few seconds later or earlier."

Hiccup gathered his arrows and placed them, along with his bow, on the table.

"You look tired." The Queen noted. She was wearing a pleasant, white dress, and her hair was held up in a very tight bun at the back of her head.

"I've been here a while."

"Burning off excess energy?"

"Something like that."

"I see."

"And what are you doing here, if I may ask?"

She raised an eyebrow. "This is my castle, you know. I visit every inch of it, so that the people know that they can reach out to me if they ever need anything."

He nodded. "That's a good strategy."

"You seem a bit distracted." The Queen noted, and Hiccup noticed her slight frown as she watched him. "Is something the matter?"

He shook his head. "Just tired, I suppose."

She nodded along, obviously not buying it, but didn't press any further.

"That was a good thing you did, taking Ernie to see his parents."

Hiccup forced himself to smile. "It was the right thing to do. I could help him see his parents when he otherwise could not, so I did it."

He had to consciously hold his tongue not to say more. How he wished that someone could do the same to him, and offer him a chance to talk to his parents. But that was too private, and could not be shared this easily.

"I feel that I should thank you."

Hiccup regarded her curiously. "I did not do it for you."

The Queen simply stared at him for a few seconds, blinking once, twice, before shaking her slightly as if to clear it.

"I know, but you went out of your way to help one of my people, and for that I am grateful."

Hiccup was about to reply, but was stopped short when another man approached him and the Queen. He closed his mouth and turned to look at the newcomer. He was a sizable man, but his mass was obviously muscle rather than strength. His mustache was impressive, and his black hair was cut short. He was armored, heavily so, with great slabs of metal. He would have made a fine viking.

As soon as the man approached the two of them and the Queen had also turned to look at him, he fell to his knee and bowed.

"My Queen." He greeted, head down.

"Rise, Ser Grakhis."

A Knight. Hiccup knew about those. Aristocrats trained in combat, forming a group of elites that could be truly fearsome in battle.

"Regards, my Queen, but I was hoping for some of Lord Haddock's time."

Hiccup blinked suddenly, not having expected that.

"Of my time, Ser Grakhis?"

The knight turned to face him directly, giving him a bow of respect. "Aye, my lord. Word reached me that the leader of a Viking tribe was visiting, so I wanted to come pay my respects. I have to say, however, from what I'd heard of the Vikings I'd expected you to be..." he trailed off, either not finding the words or not wanting to say them for fear of retribution.

"Bigger?" Hiccup ventured.

"Aye, sire."

"Well, you would normally be right, but I am a special case. Well met, Ser Grakhis. Thank you for coming all this way for me."

The knight made a show of looking around.

"Correct me if I speak nonsense, but rumors speak of a dragon, my lord."

"They would be correct, Ser. Toothless is simply not present currently."

"Aye, I hear lots about the beast since my arrival in Arrendelle." The knight said, and Hiccup had to fight the urge to snap at the man for calling Toothless a beast. Instead, he forced a cordial smile on his face.

"Can I be of assistance somehow, Ser Grakhis?"

"As luck would have it, fair lord, you could."

"Go on."

"I wish for a spar, my lord. A friendly fight between the two of us, in the spirit of good relations."

The Queen interjected, tone snappish. "I believe you're overstepping your bounds, Ser Grakhis."

The older man made a show of backing up. "Apologies, my Queen. If the Chief does not want to, then of course I shall not insist."

And herein lay the full cunning of this knight, Hiccup realized, pathetic as it may have been. By wording it this way, Hiccup would

seem as a coward if he refused.

Now, Hiccup could simply claim the knight to be too lowly for him to contend with, or a number of other excuses, but he was a Viking, and the man's comment had needled him somewhat.

He turned towards the Queen, giving her questioning look.

"You have the option of refusal, of course." She insisted.

"I think a friendly contest of arms would be good. An exchange of cultures, let's say."

The knight grinned, and the Queen frowned.

"Very well. We will arrange for an appropriate time."

The knight furrowed his brow. "Why not right now, my Queen? Both me and the good Chief are armed and ready, from what I can see."

"The Chief has been practising for hours already, Ser. I hardly find it fair for him to spar under these conditions."

Hiccup appreciated the Queen's efforts, he really did, but to be defended like this was rather embarrassing, and gave him little further option beyond accepting the knight's proposal.

"It will be fine, Queen Elsa. As Ser Grakhis said, we are both ready. No time like the present."

"Very well. I will supervise. Choose your weapons."

If Hiccup remembered correctly, Arendelle duel customs dictated one weapon per fighter. The knight immediately pulled out his claymore, a monster twice the length of Hiccup's arm, and certainly wider.

Hiccup removed the sword from his belt and placed it on the table. The knight and the Queen seemed confused.

"You're not using your, sword, my lord?"

"What, Smoker?" Hiccup said. He did not doubt that if he tried to match Smoker against the knight's beast, his blade would break like glass, never mind the fact that he would simply be overpowered if they did manage to lock blades. "He's rather meant for intimidation rather than fighting."

"A curious name." The Queen noted.

"Wanna see? Check this out." With that, Hiccup abruptly pulled out his sword, holding it in hand. It seemed normal enough, about the length of his arm, and the handle was simple, if a bit blocky.

With a simple press of his hand at the right place, the entire length of the blade began oozing pitch black smoke, as if he were holding a burnt tree branch. The effect on the sword was quite impressive. Not as impressive as the fire sword with zippelback gas, but that particular piece was meant for dragon taming, not fighting.

"Sorcery?" The knight asked as he took an involuntary step back. Hiccup snorted.

"Hardly. Try engineering. The sword is hollow at its center, and the grip actually holds oil which slowly burns inside. The smoke is distributed through a system of holes that are almost invisible to the naked eye, giving it the appearance that you now see."

"Where did you find such a magnificent weapon, my lord?"

"Why, I made it."

"And you will not choose it for our fight?"

"No." He replied as he replaced Smoker in its sheath. He reached behind him and pulled out his dagger. This had a rather more intricate hilt, a slightly curved blade, was a little shorter than the length of his elbow to the end of his fingers.

"You will fight me â€| with a knife?"

"Yup."

"Do you mean to dishonor me, Chief Haddock?"

"Hardly. The dagger is always my weapon of choice."

The knight said nothing, but Hiccup could tell he was angry.

"Prepare yourselves." The Queen said. Hiccup did not look at her, refusing to take his eyes off of his opponent. He relaxed his stance, bending his and bringing the dagger in front of him in a reverse grip. He was already warmed up, but he started shifting his weight between his legs, ready to spring in motion.

"You are both aware of the rules of engagement?" She asked, both nodded. "Winner by my call, forfeit, or unconsciousness. Lethalities will not be tolerated. Begin!"

The knight wasted no time, letting out a battle cry and bringing down his greatsword above him. Hiccup dodge to the right, letting the sword pass him by as he took a step back and landing a lightning-fast cut on the knight's unprotected his credit, Ser Grakhis managed to stop the weapon before it impacted the ground, despite the pain. Presumably he would have done the same if Hiccup had not dodged. He followed his move by swinging the sword from below, and Hiccup once again took a step back, bringing him out of the sword's range, and retaliated by grazing a small strip of exposed skin next to the elbow.

Ser Grakhis followed Hiccup's steps, raising his greatsword and using its momentum to bring it around for another swipe. Hiccup ducked under it and waited until the swing was completed before rising again. When the next downward swing came, he titled the dagger just so that the greatsword slid off of it, passing harmlessly by him once again. He took this opportunity to shove the knight with as much strength as he could. It was a testament to Grakhis' fatigue that he stumbled backwards, even though he easily doubled Hiccup's mass.

The fight continued for another minute in the same vein, with Grakhis attacking again and again while Hiccup dodged his attack and used the dagger only to deflect the greatsword and land small cuts everywhere the armor didn't cover.

Ser Grakhis was panting hard, feeling the toll of swinging the greatsword, carrying the metallic armor around and bleeding from well over a dozen small cuts. After another missed swing and a shove, which had him take several steps back so as to not fall, he finally snapped.

"Fight me, coward!" He yelled, swinging once again. Hiccup stepped out of the wild swing's range and took a few steps to the side, constantly staying in motion and forcing Grakhis to follow him.

"I am fighting you." He said.

"You've done nothing but react!"

"And yet the fight is about to end."

The knight once again attacked him, grunting in anger. Again, Hiccup expertly deflected the sword to the ground.

>What Hiccup did not expect was for one of the knight's armored fists to unlatch from the sword and swing at him. The blow found his cheek and Hiccup saw stars, blacking out momentarily as fell backwards on the sandy ground.<p>

As Hiccup struggled to regain his senses and stop the world from spinning, the knight lumbered towards him and raised the sword, intending to be threatening enough to force the fight to an end.

Hiccup's fist closed around a handful of dirt. When the knight was close enough and had began the slow swing, he threw the dirt into his open helmet. The knight yelled, reflexively closing his burning eyes and letting one hand go of the sword, which continued its course, though misdirected.

This time, the knight was not controlled enough to stop the swing, and the heavy blade crashed against the soft floor of the training area. Before he could clear his eyes or raise the sword again, Hiccup acted. He jumped to his feet and snapped a quick kick to the weapon's handle with his good leg, forcing Grakhis to let go of the heavy weapon and let out a cry of pain and surprise. Hiccup followed the move by stepping behind him and, quick as a viper, slashing at the exposed spot behind the man's knee. The knight cried out in pain as his legs gave way, forcing him to fall on his knees. He felt Hiccup's hands wrap around his throat, and had the presence of mind to bring his armored hands up, about to grab Hiccup's head.

The cold feel of metal against his neck stopped him. Hiccup held him in a chokehold, with his left hand holding the knife against his jugular.

"I win." He announced, before looking to the Queen. He could not discern what her expression meant at his current condition.

She nodded. "Winner, Chief Haddock. Release him."

Hiccup did, letting go of the man's neck and stepping back. Grakhis wheezed for a few seconds, before staggering to his feet and looking at Hiccup with wild eyes.

"You â€| you â€| cheater!"

"Pray tell, how did I cheat? I do believe I simply won our friendly match."

"With tricks and stalling!"

"One must use any tool in his arsenal to beat his opponent."

Ser Grakhis spat on the ground, face red. "You fight without honor. You disgrace your tribe, unless they are all spineless tricksters like you."

Hiccup's eyes narrowed. "Careful there, Ser Grakhis. One more word about my tribe or my honor, and next time I might go selectively deaf when the fair Queen demands I remove my dagger from your neck."

"Enough of this!" Queen Elsa shouted, drawing pauses from both men. "The fight is over. Ser Grakhis, accept your loss with the honor you claim to have, of which I have seen little sign today. Chief Haddock, please refrain from threatening my subjects."

"But my Queen-"

"I said enough! Do not test my patience, Ser Grakhis, Leave now to treat your wounds, and be sure we will have a thorough discussion about this incident soon."

"I â€| yes, my Queen." With a short bow, the man slowly left the area. The cut on the back of his knee was shallow and not really dangerous, but it was a painful spot to get cut on.

The Queen turned to Hiccup. He was still fuming, trying to keep a straight face and refrain from flinging the dagger at the back of the man's head.

"I apologise for his behavior." The Queen said. "Some people do not take to loss very well, especially to tactics they consider unnatural."

"Do you think I cheated?"

"You stayed within the regulations, there was no cheating involved. Please, let us forget about this sad little incident, yes? Take a walk with me?" She seemed rather hopeful and apologetic, but Hiccup shook his head.

He was not in the mood to play games with her, right now.

"Apologies, but I am feeling rather averse to further human company right now. I think I will retire. Good evening."

Giving her a tiny nod, he gathered his things and left. As he passed

her, she looked like she was trying to find words to voice her thoughts but coming up short. He left the bewildered Queen behind, heading to his quarters to rejoin Toothless.

His attempt to cheer himself up by letting off some steam had backfired spectacularly. Now he was feeling worse than before, and the day was coming to an end.

He did not exit his quarters for the rest of the evening, He busied himself with Toothless, and did some more work on the map, before giving up for the day and going to sleep.

When he awoke, he was feeling no better than the previous day. In fact, he'd go as far as to say that he didn't sleep well, so breakfast found him particularly moody. He asked Ernie to bring him breakfast to his quarters, and the servant complied. For lack of something better to do, he started work on the map again.

Perhaps sensing his friend's sour mood, Toothless stayed outside in the balcony and enjoyed the sun.

Taking a small break, Hiccup flopped next to his friend, trying to locate the source of his misery but coming up empty. Toothless nudged him with his snout, and it drew a smile from Hiccup as he rubbed him under the chin.

"I miss Astrid, bud." He said. "I wish she were here. She would know, she would tell me what to do, wouldn't she?"

Toothless looked at him, letting out a sound from deep inside his throat. Hiccup shook his head.

"You're right. She'd probably just punch me in the shoulder like she always does."

He stayed lost in his thoughts for a while longer, before returning inside and to his work.

Sometime before lunch, Hiccup was disturbed from his work by soft rapping against the door.

"Yes?" He called, and the door opened. In walked the Princess herself, wearing a lovely brown dress and having her hair held back by a circlet.

"Good day, Hiccup."

"And to you."

Toothless, upon noticing the new arrival, got to his feet and tried to enter through the door. The problem with that was that he didn't wait for Hiccup to open the balcony doors for him.

Upon hearing the crack, Hiccup's head snapped towards Toothless, who was standing atop the right part of the door which he had pushed off its hinges. Toothless looked rather sheepish.

Hiccup sighed, palming his face, but was not in the mood to scold Toothless. He was feeling bad enough as it was.

"Great work, bud. Really, good job." Toothless warbled lowly, in a tone clearly meant to be apologetic. Hiccup turned to the princess. "I'm really sorry about this. I'll fix it, of course."

"Nonsense." She waved it off. "No one will care, and I always thought these rooms needed a better draft. Leave it if it doesn't bother you."

"Let me just get this out of the way." Hiccup grabbed the fallen door and picked it up, setting it carefully against the wall outside, on the balcony.

Anna came closer, and frowned upon seeing the organized mess that was Hiccup's desk.

"Have you been working all morning?"

"Most of it, yes. Why?"

Anna sighed and rubbed her temples, as if chasing away a headache. "I swear you're the same as her. It wouldn't hurt to get out a bit, take a break sometime."

Hiccup was in a foul mood and was about to say something sharp, but held his tongue in the last second. The Princess had been nothing but kind to him, and he would not allow himself to be rude to her just because he wasn't allowed to cut that stupid knight's neck open.

"I'm sure whatever you have in mind will no more work for me than it did with the Queen."

Anna smiled broadly. "That's great, then, because Elsa agreed."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, and it's great. Come on!" She grabbed his hand and all but yanked him to his feet.

"I don't know if-"

"You can either come with me and see what Elsa has planned or stay up here and brood some more."

Hiccup glared at the cheeky girl, but offered no further resistance. With a giggle, the princess lead him outside the quarters, not letting go of his hand as she practically ran and dragged him with her. Sometime along the way, Ernie joined them.

They went through the now familiar path towards the Courtyard. Stopping at the gates to catch her breath, the princess opened the great doors just a crack to peek outside. Snow and wind flew in from the small opening, and when she closed the doors and turned to him she had snow on her hair.

"It's already started!" She announced excitedly, before pulling the doors all the way open and letting Hiccup pass.

What he saw gave Hiccup pause. While he had enough presence of mind

not to gape openly, he was still left speechless and unmoving.

"Welcome, Chief Hiccup," Anna said dramatically as she waved at the Courtyard "to the Arendelle versus Snow Queen Winter Games!"

The Courtyard was encased in snow and ice. Though it was a pretty sunny and all-around good day, there were fierce clouds above the Courtyard and it snowed heavily. There were two obvious sides in this engagement. One side of the Courtyard was full of people. Mostly citizens of Arendelle, but a good percentage were castle personnel, as well. They would crouch behind snow forts, or run around from one cover spot to the next, all the while preparing and throwing snowballs by the dozens. There must have been hundreds of people hurling snow at their opponent.

Said opponent was standing alone in her side of the Courtyard, hands extended and aura glowing a light blue as she controlled the weather around her. Queen Elsa was a maelstrom-literally- as she directed the fierce blizzard around her to intercept the incoming snowballs and throw new ones back.

Like Frosti himself has possessed her, he thought.

"There are rules, of course." Anna said.

"To give her a chance?" Hiccup ventured a guess. She shook her head.

"No, silly. To give them a chance."

Seeing the blizzard that the Queen directed around her and the amounts of snow she was effortlessly hurling around, Hiccup did feel slightly silly for his question. The Queen had the entire crowd pinned down with her relentless fire.

"She is not allowed to control the snow on their side of the Courtyard, or the incoming snowballs. She has to block or dodge them."

The Queen was constantly moving, even as snow rose from the ground or swirled around her and intercepted the incoming snowballs. Her hands were moving in patterns, directing waves of frost as they went about bombarding her opponents with endless snowballs.

Five minutes after Hiccup's arrival, it was obvious that the Queen was going to clean house, as most of her opponents were lying either half-buried in snow or were completely out of breath from dodging. Eventually, someone had the idea of creating a makeshift surrender flag. The Queen accepted their unconditional surrender and showed mercy, sparing everyone and even freeing those covered in snow.

Watching from the door, Hiccup was rather bemused that the usually reserved and calculating Snow Queen would put up such theatrics.

The Queen had not come out of the battle entirely unscathed, breathing heavily and dusted with snow. She clapped her hands and called out gleefully. "As the victor, yet again, of the Arendelle versus Snow Queen Winter Games, it is my pleasure to announce that

now begins the Free For All! Forget your friends, betray your family, make alliances with your bitter enemies and then betray them as well, for it is every man for himself from here on out!"

The crowd erupted into chaos, as any semblance of organization or position vanished from the other side of the Courtyard. The battle raged once again, and though no one dared to challenge the Snow Queen one on one, they saw no problem in turning on each other.

The Queen was approaching them, a content smile on her face and aura still glowing slightly. Hiccup had to admit that she looked \textasciitilde impressive. Inspiring.

"Nice of you to join us, Chief Hiccup."

"An interesting method of keeping morale."

"You disapprove?"

"On the contrary, I think it's a great idea. They look like they're having fun."

"Yes, they do. That is why—" Queen Elsa did not finish her sentence, for a medium sized snowball crashed against her cheek, sending snow all over her face, hair, and down her dress. About half of it stayed pasted to her cheek.

Very, very slowly, the Queen turned to face her sister. When she spoke, her voice was low, dangerous, and promised a slow and agonizing death.

"What exactly did you just—"

The second snowball nailed her on the forehead, and she let out a surprised yelp as she was off-balanced and ended up sprawled on the snow.

Princess Anna, not intimidated in the slightest, reached down for more snow.

"You think you're tough, don't ya? Well, I'll take you on, so bring it, Snow Loser!"

Her third snowball was blocked by a torrent of snow as the Queen rose to her feet, aided by a column of ice pushing her back. Her eyes shone an eerie blue, and a dozen snowballs floating in a perfect circle around her waist.

"Prepare yourself, sister."

The princess ran like her life depended on it—which it very well may have—and the Queen gave chase, unleashing scores of snowballs after her sister. The princess' loud laughter echoed even as she tried to take cover and fire back.

"You should join us!" She called to Hiccup when she was passing from close enough by.

He shook his head. While he could appreciate the fun they were having, he was in no mood right now for snow games.

"No thanks. I'd rather just sit here."

No sooner had he completed his sentence, when he felt something wet impact the back of his head. He reached his hand up and, sure enough, he had snow all over his hair.

He turned and levelled a venomous glare towards Ernie, the only one between Hiccup himself and the gates.

Ernie, for some reason, was looking around, bewildered.

"But â€œ!" he murmured, "but â€œ I didn'tâ€œ!"

Hiccup didn't know who the the young man thought he was fooling, because there was no one else there that could have thrown the snowball. His patience snapped, and his anger over this day and the previous was about to erupt in what he could recognize as one his few but intense temper tantrums.

Ernie was looking terrified as Hiccup was about to give the foolish servant a piece of his mind, but before Hiccup could speak, a particularly daring snowflake landed in his eyes, forcing him to close them instinctively and shake his head.

When he opened his eyes again he was seeing everything in shades of blue and silver. He thought he saw another form standing next to Ernie, but when he blinked again his vision was fine and Ernie was, like before, alone.

Quite inexplicably, he was no longer feeling like chewing Ernie out until he'd unloaded all of his frustration. Oh, the insolent whelp would still be punished, but in a much more fitting way.

He reached down for a handful of snow.

"Hiccup?" Ernie asked, obviously nervous. "Now, let's not do something rash. We can talk about this."

Having spent his entire life in Berk, Hiccup was no stranger to snowball fights. In fact, he would go as far as to say that he was quite good at them. Years of having virtually no friends and a lot of time to kill had insured that his accuracy would be almost perfect.

"You should know by now, Ernie." Hiccup said conversationally as he prepared his snowball. Not a lot of snow, so that it wouldn't hurt, but enough that it would be solid. Not too dense so that it wouldn't break on contact, but not soft enough to break apart on the way there, either. Simply, perfect.

"I am a marksman." Hiccup's hand was a blur as he reared it back, aimed in a split-second, and unleashed the snowball. It hit Ernie square between the eyes before the young man had time to duck, and the force of the throw threw Ernie to the snow, rubbing at his aching forehead.

Hiccup smiled in satisfaction, playing with another snowball he had in hand.

Very slowly, Ernie began to pick himself up, ending in a kneeling position and still trying to rid his head of snow.

Hiccup caught something on his peripheral and ducked. The first snowball soared above his head, but the second hit him on the shoulder.

"Got you!" The princess screamed as she streaked past. She all but tackled Ernie behind a snow mound.

"My my," Hiccup said, "I do not think I can let this assault on my person go unanswered."

The Queen approached him with casual steps.

"Quite right, Chief Hiccup. The nerve of these peasants, wouldn't you say?"

"I think that they need a reminder of who they're dealing with."

"Indeed. I propose an alliance."

"Mutually beneficial to our cultures. I accept."

One of Elsa's floating snowballs landed on Hiccup's hand.

Behind the mound, Anna had managed to rouse Ernie's fighting spirit.

"We do not fear you!" She yelled from her spot. "This is where we'll make our stand, so come at us!"

"You hear that, Queen Elsa?" Hiccup said casually 'They do not fear us."

Elsa smiled slowly "They should."

And the fight was on.

Queen Elsa could have conquered all, but what would be the fun in that? Hiccup was a precision shooter that never missed, so they opted to go for a system where the Queen kept up their defense while supplying Hiccup with ready-made snowballs to continue the offensive.

Anna and Ernie fought valiantly. Ernie challenged Hiccup directly, and even showed a pretty good innate talent and a strong hand, while Anna pelted them with as many snowballs as she could, forgetting accuracy in favor of volume.

It was perhaps a tougher fight than it should have been, but the end was inevitable. Hiccup and the Queen stood above the defeated half-buried bodies of their opponents, who were awaiting their fate.

"What say you, Chief Hiccup, do we spare them?"

"I don't know. This one attacked me from behind."

"Wasn't â€| me."

"And he's lying. Not sure I can forgive that."

Anna dramatically raised her hand and pretended that it shook, badly. She directed one of the most powerful puppy dog eyes Hiccup had ever seen at the Queen, who reeled as if hit physically.

"Sister â€| please. Have mercy." The princess pleaded.

The Queen looked torn, but after a few seconds of staring at that expression, she caved with a sigh.

"I will be lenient, this time."

"Yay! You're the best."

With that, their little game ended. Hiccup helped Ernie to his feet and helped him be rid of the snow, though that was a hopeless endeavor if ever there was one.

Everyone was happy but exhausted and drenched, so they said their goodbyes and left for their respective quarters.

There was little Hiccup desired more at that moment than a bath, some food, and maybe a nap. He left a trail of water behind him as he walked.

Idly, he pondered his sudden shift in mood from an explosive anger to playfulness. He had no explanation for it, but decided to not dwell on it too much.

On the way to his quarters, he noticed a door ajar. Vaguely remembering this room from his first tour of the place, he peeked inside. What was it that Ernie had called it?

Oh, yes. The Bath-house. He still remembered the impression the big room had left him with. He had marvelled at it and what it was supposed to do.

But now, the giant bath, pool thing was not empty. It was full of water. Hot water, by the looks of it. The previously empty room now had several towels and other bathing equipment, and looked like the best place to be right now.

Temptation, temptation. Was he even allowed to use it?

"Excuse me!" he called to a passing servant, a young woman who looked at him, turned red for some reason and then looked at her feet.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Is the Bath-house restricted?"

"No, my Lord."

"So, I could use it?"

She hesitated for a few seconds. "Technically, yes, you are allowed.

But - "

"That's grand, then! Thank you very much!"

He left the flustered servant behind and all but raced to his rooms. There, he retrieved a set of clean clothes before returning to the Bath-house. No one was there, so he let himself in and closed the door behind him.

He approached the pool and touched the water. It was warm, but not hot.

He divested himself of his robe, and then the shirt he wore under it, leaving him with only the soaked, brown leather pants. He set about removing his prosthetic, and he was still at it when he heard the door open.

He looked up, half-ready to apologise for something, when the words died in his throat.

What stepped through the door must certainly have been Gersemi, goddess of beauty, herself.

The crazy thought left his mind as soon as it had arrived, and Hiccup mentally chastised himself. The woman in front of him, beautiful though she was, was not Gersemi.

Queen Elsa wore a light satin robe and white slippers. Her golden-white hair was loose, and framing her face and falling in waves to her hips. The robe was so flimsy it was ridiculous. It practically embraced her body.

"Chief Hiccup," the Queen greeted, equally surprised to find him here as he was to see her. "I did not expect to find you here."

"Sho- ehem... should I not be? I asked, and they told me it was okay, but if I'm bothering you I can leave." Hiccup said cursing himself as he stumbled over his words.

She seemed to consider him for a while, arms crossed in front of her, before she relaxed. A small, slightly naughty smile found its way to her lips.

"No," she said "no bother. Please, stay. This might be the time that I usually take my swim, but nothing is actually stopping others from doing the same. The pool is public."

Hiccup now understood the magnitude of his blunder. He paled as he considered that he'd invaded one of the Queen's most private moments.

"I should go."

"But you went to the trouble of releasing your foot. I wouldn't want you to miss out on the water."

With a start, Hiccup realized that he was naked from the waist up, and that he had indeed removed his prosthetic foot. A sudden wave of self-consciousness hit him as considered his stump, and the scars that littered his torso.

"Does it bother you, that I am here?" The Queen asked gently, coming closer to the edge of the pool.

"Not exactly. I got used to my injury a long time ago. It's just â€œ old habits. Regardless, I don't want to intrude on your personal time."

The Queen did not reply to him immediately. She was facing the pool, away from him. Slowly, her hands opened from their clasped position, each holding a hem of her robe. She wasn't going to- Slowly, she moved the robe over her shoulders and then let it gently fall to the ground.

Hiccup was speechless, his throat feeling drier than charcoal. He was again having trouble distinguishing who exactly was in front of him. Perhaps it was indeed the goddess, playing tricks on him?

The Queen's underthings consisted of a smaller, dress-like white piece that covered her from just below the shoulders to her thighs. It was white though, and see-through enough to make out the Queen's underthings.

Elsa turned her head sideways, barely keeping him in her field of vision, and smiled.

"But you are not intruding. Please, join me."

With that, she slowly descended the steps into the pool, each step submerging more and more of her.

When she was in the water up to her neck, she turned to him, shooting him another enchanting smile.

"Will you come?"

Hiccup tried to think beyond his knee-jerk reaction to that, but his brain was not being very co-operative. He had a feeling that this could end very badly, but then again, he was a guest here and had to play along with the Queen's requests, right? She had said it was a public bath.

He removed his leather pants, leaving himself only with the underpants, a dark brown piece that reached his knees.

He considered for a while. Without his foot, he would have to hop over to the pool and then descend by sitting in each step, a process that did not seem at all fitting for the situation.

The Queen seemed to share his thoughts, because she waved her hand outside of the water, and a single railing made of smooth ice created itself next to Hiccup. Rather than be embarrassed at the help, he was grateful that he was saved the embarrassment of actually hopping over and doing a balancing act.

"Thank you."

With the rail's help, he reached the pool easily enough. The steps were also easy to descend, as the rail continued inside the pool. It led him close to the Queen, who was waiting for him in the middle of

the pool. Being quite a bit taller than her, part of his chest was outside of the water. To remedy this, Hiccup bent his knee, bringing him and the Queen to eye level.

Well, this was uncharted territory, to say the least.

"How do you like the water?"

"Honestly? I'm trying to figure out how this whole water mass is heated."

The Queen laughed softly. "Typical. I do not know enough of the engineering to give you the conventional answer, butâ€|"

As she said this, she scooted closer to him. She raised her hand above the water, and dipped a single finger not five centimeters away from his chest. She swirled it a little, and a few seconds later Hiccup had to repress a gasp of surprise as the water turned cold, incredibly so.

"And I can also reverse it." With these words, she repeated the process, and the cold that had surrounded him vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"I see." Hiccup cleared his throat at tried to keep his eyes in the vicinity of her face "You must be handy to have around."

Her eyes were blue.

Hiccup had known that, technically. It was one of the first things he'd noticed about her. But this seemed like a whole new realization.

Her eyes were a shining blue, almost sparkling. Her lips were a reddish pink and slightly open, her breath coming out in uneven bursts. Her cheeks had a rosy tint to them. She was gorgeous.

Hiccup had strained to not lose focus. He was treading on very thin ice, here.

The finger did not retract. Rather, she used it to touch him, trailing the finger softly along the length of a faded scar above his collarbone. He could not decide if her touch felt like fire or ice on his skin.

"Can you tell me about this one?"

"Knife wound."

She hmm'd, and he'd be damned if it wasn't the sexiest sound he'd heard in a while. The finger trailed further, going left to a round puncture wound that was still slightly red.

"And this one?"

"Dragon tooth."

She repeated the sound, and the finger wandered even farther. It stopped upon an angular mark, barely visible, about half a palm in width.

"And this one?"

"I slipped and fell when I was seven."

The Queen laughed, disturbing the still surface of the water and getting both their faces wet.

She flowed gracefully in the water, circling around him until she was looking at the part of his back that was exposed. She touched her finger on a long-healed burn.

"What about this?"

"Accident in the forge. I don't recommend it."

"And is that common? Are many of your scars due to accidents?" She returned to her original position, in front of him. Her platinum blonde hair was floating in the water around her, framing her face and giving it an otherworldly glow.

"I have made no secret of my clumsiness."

She nodded. "True. I did not believe you when you said so."

"Well, now you have proof."

He did not reply. They were nearly touching; he was close enough to catch even the slightest flicker of movement her eyes made and he definitely caught the blushing of her cheeks or the way she bit the side of her lower lip for a couple of seconds. The silence that followed was tense, and Hiccup knew enough to realize that the tension between them was building up and that cases like these usually lead to-

He moved away slowly, deliberately breaking the moment. She took a deep breath, obvious by the rise and fall of her chest, as if recovering from the experience. He couldn't say that he was much better. They separated, giving each other some space. Hiccup took the time to thoroughly enjoy the good soak. Nearby, the Queen herself relaxed in the water, closing her eyes. He decided to follow her example, and allowed himself to relax in the water's embrace.

Somehow, they ended up next to each other again, due-he was almost certain- to no effort on Hiccup's part. He did not feel the need to fill the silence with pointless chatter; there were other times for that. This was special.

One of her fingers traced the outline of his collarbone, Hiccup assumed it she wasn't even aware she was doing it. He gently took her hand into his own, just to stop her trailing fire over his chest. He had seen the lethality of Elsa the Snow Queen, this Elsa was a whole different kind of dangerous.

"Do you want to know how I lost my foot?" He asked in the silence.

She opened her eyes, straightened and looked at him, a small, pleasant smile on her face.

"If you want to tell me." She looked at their hands, still linked underwater, but did not comment nor did she pull away.

"It was five years ago." he began. "And Berk was much like Arendelle is now, fearful of dragons, thinking them mindless beasts of destruction. We had a nest nearby, and our village would be raided often. One could say that our culture revolved around fighting dragons. Everybody did it."

He paused to gather his thoughts, and did not notice the Queen move her free hand until it was against his cheek, gently moving his gaze to her.

"But not you." She said with certainty. He nodded, hoping to all the gods listening that she would not be able to feel the heat of his cheek as blood rushed to the point of contact.

"Not me. I was always different. Smaller. Weaker. I studied, I wrote, I read, I built. My early contraptions were more disasters waiting to happen than inventions, but one of them managed to finally down a dragon. That dragon was Toothless. I should have killed him in the woods that day. I tried, even. But I couldn't."

"Of course you couldn't."

"He was injured, so I took care of him instead, hiding him from the village. We grew to trust and love each other. In time, the real reason the dragons were raiding our village became known to me. A sea dragon, then one we now call the Red Death, was forcing the other dragons in ever expanding hunting paths in order to feed it. If the dragons did not bring enough they were eaten, themselves."

"How big was that dragon to be able to eat other dragons?"

"As big as your castle, I would say." At her gaping expression, he nodded. "Perhaps even bigger. It was living inside a volcano before we drew it out. Toothless and I, along with our friends, fought against the beast. We managed to kill it, but not without losses. My foot was one such loss. From that day onwards, the dragons have been our friends and allies."

She was silent for a long time, probably digesting all that he had told her. He did not fault her. It was a lot for anyone to take in.

A minute later, she gave his hand a subtle squeeze, drawing his attention. She held a gentle smile.

"I know we've had â€œ our problems," she began, apprehensively, "but thank you. For trusting me with this."

He smiled back, not having anything else to say. Her proximity was making him light-headed, and he could swear that his heartbeat was loud enough that she could hear it.

The Queen must have noticed that they were getting ever closer, because she gently withdrew her hands from him and took a few slow steps back.

"Thank you for the company, Chief Hiccup." She said. "Unfortunately, my schedule does not allow me any more downtime."

He nodded at her. "Thank you for allowing me to bother you at your private time."

She turned her back to him and slowly ascended the steps. Hiccup stilled, certain that his heart, as well as his brain, must have stopped too.

As she rose, the fabric of her underwear clung to her body like a second skin, and the soaked under-dress covered nothing of the rest of her underwear, leaving little to the imagination. The view of her slowly rising form was breathtaking. First the platinum blonde hair left the water, followed by gentle hands, perfect curves, ending with legs that looked impossibly long on a woman almost a head shorter than he was.

As the Queen walked to her bathrobe, he couldn't help but notice the accentuated movements of her hips. There was little thought going through his head as he stared, entranced.

She reached for her robe, before turning her head sideways to look at him, and he could see a smile on her face that he could only classify as smug.

"As I said, Chief Hiccup, no intrusion at all."

Then she committed the horrible crime of covering up. That forced Hiccup out of his stupor, and he did not miss the satisfied look on her face as she departed, leaving him alone in the warm water.

That ~~she~~ that ~~she~~ that evil woman! She did that on purpose, he just knew it. He was so getting back at her for this embarrassment. Just as soon as he got out of the water, he would think about how best to go about his revenge.

Looking down at himself, he sighed. He wouldn't be getting out of the water for a while.

Perhaps he should have asked her to turn the water ice-cold before leaving.

~H~

The next day found Hiccup in a contemplative mood. He was feeling better than two previous days, but his sudden bout of moodiness had left him apprehensive. He spent the morning thinking while absentmindedly working on the map.

What had caused his terrible mood? He didn't remember any particular incident that might have made him angry or unhappy. Sure, seeing Enie reunite with his parents stung, but he was used to that and even if he wasn't, it shouldn't be enough to bring him so close to a temper tantrum.

Perhaps the problem had many facets. He missed Berk, he missed his people and his loved ones, that was true. But that also happened the other times he was travelling, and it never resulted in him getting angry or frustrated. Perhaps the problem lie even deeper, to the fact

that he had come to the point of creating relationship here in Arendelle? Maybe the creation of friendships brought the pain of separation to the forefront of his mind rather than the backseat it always occupied when he was travelling? But then, that still wasn't enough to explain everything.

Hiccup knew that he became volatile when he was angry. A problem, rather than a solution. He hated losing his temper, but he hated not knowing why even more. He resolved to get to the bottom of this, and to avoid it happening ever again.

Still, he dared not join the Queen for breakfast. Remembering the previous day's incident brought some heat to his face again, but most of all it brought confusion. What did it all mean? Was the Queen still angry with him? She couldn't be, after last evening's well, display, right? But the subject of their trust issues had not been brought up. She might still hold it against him. Then again, she did thank him for trusting her with the background of his lost limb, so that had to count for something.

Moreover, was it possible that she was attracted to him? Apparently the pool was open to the public, but he can't imagine that she would act like well, that, for any random citizen. Looking at it objectively, hard as it was to put in perspective, Hiccup came to the conclusion that she knew exactly what she was doing and had a good reason to. He had no idea what her angle was, though.

Hiccup wondered if all women were needlessly complicated like that, or if he just had a gift for picking them out.

He shared lunch with Ernie and Toothless. After that, he and Toothless decided to fly for a bit. They had a small audience, like always, but this time Hiccup could see a lot of young people watching eagerly, waiting for the two of them to fly. When they did, he even heard some cheering.

Vain as he was, Toothless insisted that they do some tricks for their spectators, to which Hiccup was not against. By the time they ended the relatively simple manoeuvre sequence, they had the attention of roughly half the castle's inhabitants and many of the citizens.

They landed to applause, and Hiccup waved to the crowd, inwardly cheering that they were receiving such a positive response. He knew that as the presence of dragons could become accepted with time. As long as something becomes a fixture in someone's life, a constant presence, acceptance is not far behind.

He had to rush to get dressed in a fine green tunic and groomed in time for Court, but he managed it, and he and Toothless took their seats. His draconian friend once again took to napping it out, but he was watching more attentively than usual. In particular, he watched the Queen like a hawk, and did not miss the furtive glances she would occasionally send his way. Interesting.

After Court was done, Toothless put his foot-or paw, rather- down and all but dragged him outside, demanding to get out of the castle. Hiccup agreed, not being against visiting the rest of the town again.

The sun went down as they walked leisurely, Hiccup greeting people

and sending smiles around while Toothless did his best peacock impression, under the awestruck gazes of the people of Arendelle.

Hiccup rolled his eyes as his friend once again casually flexed his wings, earning many impressed sounds from the passerby.

"Honestly," he said, "I could confuse you with a Nadder if I didn't know any better."

He received a soft, argumentative tail-slap in response, as well as a gruff sound from Toothless' throat.

"And don't think I missed the way you meticulously cleaned every single scale of yours earlier. You had this all planned, didn't you?"

Toothless warbled again, denial evident in his tone, but Hiccup knew him enough to catch the obvious lie.

"You're a terrible liar, bud."

He would have said more, but he stopped when he saw a pair of Arendelle footmen approach him. They were wearing the characteristic uniforms of the city guard, not the castle security force, and were armed with swords and shields.

They stopped in front of him and Toothless in perfect sync and formation.

"Chief Haddock, greetings."

"And to you, good sirs. What can I do for you?"

"Sir, your presence is required. Queen's orders. You must come with me."

Hiccup's smile slowly melted away. His brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed.

"Where are we going?"

"Not far from here, sir."

"And you say the Queen ordered it?"

"Yes sir, and we are pressed for time, so if you could please follow me."

Something didn't sit very well with Hiccup. If the Queen required his presence, why did she send infantrymen to fetch him? Why not Ernie or some other servant?

He exchanged a wary look with Toothless. Picking up on his rider's apprehension, Toothless too became alerted, ear-flaps rising and nostrils flaring.

He turned back to the soldiers. "Okay, let's go."

"Alone, if you don't mind. Your dragon will have to wait for you

here."

Warning drums set off in Hiccup's mind. It wasn't exactly a secret that the Queen disliked Toothless, but to actually demand that he not show up? There was something wrong with this whole picture.

"That will not happen. I will come with Toothless, or not at all."

The soldier's expression hardened. "Sir, Queen's orders."

"She is not my Queen. If you want me to come, Toothless will come as well."

The soldiers turned their gaze to Toothless, looking at him critically for a few seconds, assessingly. Hiccup had seen similar looks in his own people, but that had been over five years ago.

"Very well. Follow us."

At his nod, the two soldiers turned and assumed a crisp walk. Hiccup followed behind them, staying close to Toothless.

The soldiers led the two of them to the west side of town, to a part where the buildings were not as high, and the roads mostly empty and not very well lit.

They suddenly turned into a road that led between two long buildings, with barely any light inside. Hiccup followed them.

When they had reach about the middle of the alley, Hiccup saw more people approach from the other end. A quick glance behind him showed that three more people were approaching from that direction. One of them wore a soldier's attire.

The two soldiers in front of them stopped, and were joined by the two others that were coming from the other end.

The people aside from the three soldiers were wearing civilian clothes, but they armed with swords and pikes. One of the four in front of them even held a crossbow.

This was definitely a trap. He heard Toothless shift next to him, pulling his limbs back in preparation of a pounce. He heard the low rumble from deep in the dragon's belly, the sign that he was preparing a large amount of gas.

His own fingers clenched around the hilt of his dagger, inside his tunic.

The soldier that had spoken before addressed him again.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be, Chief."

Hiccup replied, even as he carefully looked around. "How may I make this less difficult, then?"

He spotted another figure, on the roof to their left. He, too, held a crossbow.

"Tell your dragon to stand down and surrender yourself. Then it, at least, will make it out of here."

Assessing the sniper on the roof as the most threatening, he subtly glanced at Toothless. His friend had made the same thought, his big green eyes locked on the crossbowman.

He turned back to the soldier ahead of him.

"What about me, then?"

"There is no scenario in which you make it out of here alive."

"I beg to differ. Now!"

At his command, both he and Toothless sprang to motion. Toothless roared and unleashed a ball of blue flame, which impacted against the sniper's chest almost instantly. The ball exploded, killing the man instantly and removing him from view.

Hiccup pulled his hand from behind his back, drawing his dagger and launching it in the same motion. The knife streaked through the air before lodging itself hilt-deep on the other crossbowman's neck. The man let go of his weapon, bringing his hands up to his throat and gurgling blood, before falling backwards.

The rest of their enemies began to move, rushing at them from both directions. Toothless spun and launched himself, claws-first, against the three people at their rear.

Hiccup tuned out his friend's wrathful roars, as he focused on his own opponents. The leader, the man who had talked, was still armed with a sword and shield but the second soldier had exchanged his for the pike the third man, dressed in civilian clothes, had brought.

The first to reach him was the civilian. He swung his blade at Hiccup and he drew back to evade it. He continued his rush, aiming to clobber him with the shield, but Hiccup twisted around it. He brought a hand to the edge of the shield and grabbed hold, pulling even as he moved, positioning himself behind his enemy. He wrapped his right hand around his neck and with the other took control of the shield. He span the two of them around just in time for the civilian's shield to block the soldier's pike.

Pressing harder against the man's throat, he planted his left knee on his side. He pulled at the shield and repositioned his hostage. The next pike thrust found the civilian on the chest. He screamed in horror and pain as he clutched at it, trying vainly to pull it out as he dropped to the ground. Hiccup took the shield from the dead man's clutch. With his free hand, he pressed a certain metallic piece of his prosthetic, hearing the soft clink of success.

The soldier, having lost his pike, drew a shortsword and attacked him. Hiccup slammed the sword to the left with the shield. Being wide open, Hiccup brought his left foot to the front and kicked the man sideways on the chest. The metallic prosthetic by itself was rather painful, but the six inch blade that had sprung from its bottom was deadly. The man tried to stay on his feet, but Hiccup slammed the

shield on his head and the soldier dropped to the ground, unconscious and bleeding to death.

Throughout the fighting, Toothless roars and the screams of dying men had not let up.

Hiccup dropped the shield. The leader, who had been staying back due to the lack of space, was finally upon him. He ducked under the heavy sword swing and rolled forward, before springing to his feet. He ran a few steps and pulled his dagger free of the dead crossbowman's neck.

He turned to fight the leader. The soldier rushed at him, and Hiccup parried his thrust. Unfortunately, that left him open to the shield, which the enemy took advantage of as Hiccup suddenly saw stars from being slammed on the head. He stumbled back, thankful that his nose wasn't broken, and had enough presence of mind to duck another swing.

The man was much bigger than he was, and a tiny bit taller. There was no way he could overpower him. He parried the next thrust to his right and the enemy's left, keeping the shield at bay and aiming his dagger at the man's neck. He twisted, making Hiccup's dagger impact the leather armor of his shoulder. The angle wasn't right, so Hiccup didn't manage to pierce through it. With a grunt, the soldier abandoned the shield and pushed Hiccup off of him. Hiccup's back slammed against a brick wall, which made his vision swim. The soldier wasted no chance, grabbing a fistful of Hiccup's tunic and pulling, throwing him further down the alley.

Hiccup tripped on something, falling heavily to the ground. He scraped both his knees and an elbow, but he had managed to keep hold of his knife.

He rose to his feet shakily, and turned just in time to sloppily redirect the downward sword slash. He was not prepared for the next strike, and only just managed to bring up the dagger to block the sword.

They stayed locked like this for a few seconds, as Hiccup tried to keep back the much stronger man.

"You will die here." The soldier grunted, pushing the sword just a little closer to Hiccup's face.

"You cannot beat me." He taunted again. The blade was almost touching Hiccup, who was straining just to hold it back with his dagger. He picked up a sound from behind him.

"I don't have to beat you." He said, before taking a quick step backwards. The soldier was not prepared for it and he stumbled forward. Hiccup grabbed hold of both of his hands and swung them around, effectively changing positions, before letting go.

The man stumbled forward again and was disoriented. Having lost track of Hiccup for a second, he raised his head to try and find him.

The last thing the soldier saw was an open maw full of bloody, razor-sharp teeth, before Toothless clamped his jaws around his head.

Hiccup sagged as Toothless finished off the last of their enemies, having easily dispatched the three enemies that had flanked them. He hurt everywhere, he was pretty sure the shield had concussed him, and his knees were bleeding.

Toothless came to a stop next to Hiccup. He truly looked terrifying, head and limbs covered in blood that was not his, slowly dripping from his maw and claws.

"Thanks, bud." Hiccup wheezed, still trying to regain his breath.

Toothless ears perked up and he turned his head towards the entrance. Hiccup evened his breathing to try to listen. He could make out voices and the organized running of troops. Hopefully they'd be legitimate troops this time.

He took to cleaning his blade of blood on his tunic, which was already ruined. He felt exhausted, and the implications of the attack boggled his mind to the point that he did not even want to think about it right now. He briefly considered the possibility that the Queen had actually organized the attack, but he wrote it off immediately. She'd had plenty of better chances, and there was no motivation for such a badly prepared ambush at this time.

A contingent of castle guards rushed into the alley, Queen Elsa herself leading them. Hiccup was glad to see her, for this meant that these were actual guards, and not fakes. Despite that, he could not muster the good mood to smile, surrounded as he was by their fallen enemies.

The Queen froze on the entrance of the alley, her eyes taking in the carnage. Her gaze swept through the mangled bodies, some of them in civilian clothes and others dressed as her own soldiers, and finally landed on Toothless's and his own bloodied forms.

Dread filled him as he noticed her expression twist from confusion to shock and then finally settle for a murderous glare that the Queen directed at him and Toothless. He stilled, his dagger all of a sudden almost burning his hand.

"Wait, don't -"

"Seize him!" He heard the Queen yell, and the soldiers rushed into the alley, heading right for him.

Toothless took two steps towards the advancing soldiers, opened his wings fully and roared. The Queen wasted no time, throwing her hands forward and creating an incredibly fast current of frost. The magic attack hit Toothless in the chest, and the dragon screeched as he was frozen, before abruptly falling silent when the ice covered his head as well.

"No!" Hiccup shouted as he saw Toothless get flash-frozen. "Stop it! We -"

He wasn't allowed to complete the sentence, as he was grabbed on the shoulder by a guard. Reflexively he removed the offending appendage with a quick twist of his hand and violently pushed the man away, to

crash on another guard. He advanced towards Toothless, ducking under a man's grip as he tried to come closer and do something. Before he could take another step, he was suddenly tackled to the ground by two guards. He managed to raise his head enough to see Toothless, now completely lost to the ice.

He felt a sharp pain to the back of his head, before falling into darkness.

~H~

10. Elsa 5

****Disclaimer:**** Any characters, situations or places that you recognized are the trademarked property of Disney, Dreamworks, and their associates. I humbly use their amazing worlds to tell my story to no profit.

****Acknowledgements:** **As always, to the Lady Sorrows, who has been keeping me company during these dark times of insomnia that have reduced me to a mere shade of my normal self. Even if her glorious hair goes away with time(or washes off), her glory will remain for eternity.

There are two more inspirational benefactors for this chapter, but I will not list them right now to avoid possible spoilers. If you're interested, ask me in a review and I'll tell you.

****Notes:** **If anyone skilled is reading this, I'd love to see a bit of fanart inspired by it. I love drawings, and I've seen a lot of great pieces for both HTTYD and Frozen.

This chapter was a bitch to write, and I think it's gotten away from me a bit. It spawned a lot of controversy among my proofreaders regarding the validity of a lot that goes down. You'll know what I'm talking about when you get there. There's a long discussion to be had regarding this chapter's developments, something not really appropriate for an Author's Note. All I can say is that, this fic is written in accordance to what I believe to be the natural progression of the canon characters if they were presented with specific situations and given enough time. It is true to my personal interpretation of the characters, with which some may disagree.

Edit 3/5/15: Formatting issues

So, without further ado:

* * *

><p>~E~
A Chance Encounter
>Chapter 10
~E~**

* * *

><p>It was chaos. For a few terrible seconds, nobody knew what to do. With both the Chief and the dragon neutralized, everyone simply stared at the carnage.<p>

Elsa heard the sound of someone's stomach emptying from behind her.

It was all she could do not to vomit, herself.

She surveyed the scene once again.

There were bodies strewn around. Blood was everywhere, pools of red spreading across the cobblestones. She could tell the dragon's victims from the Chief's, there was less of them left.

Abruptly, the shock and adrenaline wore off. When that happened, the foul stench of gore and post-mortem released bowels hit her and she reeled, dry heaving for a few seconds before she managed to bring her stomach under control.

"-ders, my Queen?"

She shook her head once and closed her eyes, breathing deeply through her mouth and trying to concentrate on the officer trying to talk to her.

She opened her eyes and focused on the worried eyes of the soldier in front of her. Mentally, she steadied herself, shutting away all other thoughts but what had to be done.

"Gather the bodies and clean them. Find out who they are. Keep the civilians away. Take him—" and here she pointed an infuriatingly trembling hand at the unconscious Viking, hanging limply between two of her men, "to a guest room and post guards inside and outside."

When she had heard the dragon's unmistakable roar followed by the explosion, she'd taken her guards and ran through the streets of Arendelle, hoping against all hope that she wouldn't come across such a scene. Her people, maimed, dismembered and killed by the dragon. The Chief himself cleaning his dagger of their blood. The same dagger he'd pushed against her neck; it seemed so long ago.

How could this have happened? What slight or situation could have possibly led to the butchering of her guardsmen? It made no sense.
It made no sense. Wasn't it just yesterday that-

She shook her head again. This was no time for such thoughts. She had to deal with this, first. The 'why' would become clear soon enough, but right now she had to get a handle on this before she had a mob at her gates. Already curtains were twitching all along the street, taking in the scene of the dead men in Arendelle uniform, an immobilised dragon and an unconscious Chief despite the containment efforts of her men. Unless properly handled, rumours would soon be finding their way across the city that the dragon, once an unusual but charming novelty, was now a dangerous beast that had slaughtered their own men. She knew her people, and they would demand retribution, probably in the form of Toothless's head.

She could not stay here any longer. If she did, she would not be able to control her stomach. She turned and took a few steps away from the carnage, only to stop when a voice yelled; "My Queen! The dragon!"

She turned sharply, her gaze landing on the immense block of ice that contained the dragon Toothless. Indeed, something strange was happening. The ice was â€œ glowing? The dark silhouette of the dragon

inside had lit up ominously, the light it emitted steadily increasing.

And she felt it. The pressure, building. Something was pressing against her ice, from the inside. Impossible as it seemed to her, her ice was about to break. She estimated that she had less than thirty seconds before she would have to deal with an unchained, berserk dragon.

No one else would die today.

"Oh no, you don't."

Her eyes glowed a vibrant blue, and frost emanated from her raised hands as she focused. She took a breath, and drew fully from the deep, cold reservoirs of power that had existed inside of her ever since she was a child. She could go years without doing more than skimming the surface of these dark, quiet lakes, without having to plunge fully into their dark depths. Yet here she was, forced to do so for the second time to deal with a dragon. Icy winds picked up of their own accord around her as her magic surged towards the block, strengthening the ice, condensing it. She kept it up for a whole minute, working on making it as unbreakable as she could possibly make it. The ice block thickened and darkened, until no shape was visible. The glow continued, but it no longer threatened the prison's integrity. Eventually, it petered out, defeated.

Her eyes returned to their normal blue color and she sagged, breathing heavily. Sweat rolled down her brow, and it took her a few seconds for her vision to clear.

When she was recovered, she looked at the ice prison critically. The outer layer had formed shapes, runes in some ancient language that she could not understand but felt that some part of her instinctively knew. It would hold even Hiccup's mighty dragon inside, unharmed but contained, she was sure. It was what she had asked for, what she had intended, and the dark lakes had answered her. Hiccup had been right, in a sense. It still frightened her. There was always a price for such power, and she sometimes wondered what she would eventually have to pay.

"Bring a cart for the dragon. And a blanket to cover it."

~E~

Things got no less hectic when she reached her office. The whole castle was abuzz, and it fell to her to take control of the situation and calm everything down. Which did not become any easier with almost a dozen corpses in her morgue and a foreign leader in her custody.

Half the night was taken up fielding angry demands from her court and officers for Hiccup's imprisonment, for Toothless' execution, for warâ€| Each time she heard the story of what had happened, it had grown bigger with the telling. Toothless and Hiccup had killed a dozen men, a garrison, attacked the castle, attacked her. So much time was spent refuting false rumours and calming people that it was not until a few hours later that the realization that she had the leader of a dragon-riding nation under arrest really hit home.

She did not know what to think. Coming across a scene like that-well, arresting the Chief had been her only option, but would her actions bring a horde of dragon-mounted vikings down upon Arendelle? She was strong, yes, but she was one person. She could not be everywhere, and she could not defend the entire kingdom by herself. An offensive by a slighted Berk would not end well for her people. Hiccup was still alive, though. That certainly had to count for something, especially in a negotiation situation.

Elsa felt sick, how had things changed so fast? Just yesterday, it had seemed like a good idea to tease information out of him in her damn underthings. And today she was considering his worth as a political hostage.

Alone in her office, she put her head in her hands. Until yesterday, she'd thought that she knew him, at least to a certain degree. That she had his character mostly figured out, even if his past was, for the most part, a mystery. She had been sure that she had seen enough of him to make a fair assessment, and that assessment had been extraordinarily positive.

And wasn't that just pathetic? That until yesterday, she'd harbored a crush on him? She couldn't muster any of that fluttering feeling that she felt at the bath-house, or any of the other instances where they were alone. All she could feel right now was anger, at him and at herself for not seeing this coming, for being tricked a second time.

Had Hans not been enough of a lesson? Hadn't he proved that if someone appeared too good to be true, that was because he wasn't? She had sworn, then, that she would never again fall for such an act. Yet here she was today, just as fooled as she'd been four years ago.

And maybe she was bitter, maybe she was angry because for once, just once, she'd thought that fate had been kind to her. That perhaps she had found someone who understood her and maybe-

The window of her office, long since frozen completely, shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. She startled and lost her train of thought. She realized that she was breathing harshly and quickly, leaving foggy trails in the air, dark ice had crept over every available surface, fusing her paperwork to her desk.

She had to pull herself together. She did not lose control like this, she never did. Control, that's what she was good at, had to be since childhood. She ran a hand through her hair, uncharacteristically devoid of a braid. Her dress was crumpled, her hair was a mess and she was pretty sure her eyes were red and puffy with exhaustion.

Her door opened without any knocking and she was prepared to lash out at whoever it is, only for the words to die out in her throat at the sight of literally the only person that she would not snap at, even now.

Anna rushed in, looking decidedly distressed. She didn't even break stride at the sight of the smashed windows and frozen room.

"Elsa!" She exclaimed as soon as she approached. "I've been waiting

to talk to you for over an hour! What happened?"

"Many things happened. Eight people are dead. The Chief and the dragon are being held, accused of their murders."

Anna nodded, grim faced, "I was hoping not even this much was true. Terrible as it is to say at least that's not as bad as some of the rumours I've heard these last few hours, like he attacked you and now we are at war. Is it possible there has been a misunderstanding? I cannot see Hiccup slaughtering eight of our men."

Elsa shook her head, feeling numb. "I saw them, myself."

Anna seemed at a loss for a few seconds as she processed this, before shaking her head.

"Even so, I was just to see Hiccup. Elsa, he's injured, the guards are letting no one in."

"He can wait." She said, venom dripping from her voice. "I'll deal with him after I've dealt with this mess." She knew that he was in no danger of dying, and wasn't about to coddle him.

"Elsa, he's made a bloody mess of the bed. He needs to be treated. I'm not the most political person, but even I know that this is too much."

Elsa clenched her fists, hating how they trembled.

Anna stopped, giving her a second look. Her expression softened.

"Are you okay?"

Elsa stared at her hands. Was she? Did she have to lie to Anna?

"I'm no."

In the blink of an eye, Anna had ran around the desk and was wrapping Elsa in a fierce hug. Uncomfortable though it was, what with Elsa being seated, she wrapped her arms around her sister just as fiercely.

"It'll be fine, Elsa. It'll be okay, you'll see."

She did not realize that she was crying until after she saw her tears stain Anna's green dress.

She untangled herself and tried ineptly to wipe her eyes.

Anna's expression was sympathetic. "You need to get a grip."

Elsa snorted, because that statement was so true that it was funny. "I know."

"I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for all this."

Elsa was not so sure. " I just how could I be so wrong, Anna? Again?"

Anna did not reply. She had no reply to give. As one of Hiccup's staunchest supporters from the beginning, and the one who was personally duped by Hans, she was probably asking herself the same question. Instead, she repeated: "You need to get a grip."

"And you need to see to it that his wounds are properly treated. Make sure everyone conducts themselves professionally."

"Allright."

With one last hug, Anna walked back to the other side of the desk. She offered her sister a smile that almost looked real, before reaching for the door.

"And Anna?" At her sister's inquisitive look, Elsa continued, a little sheepishly: "Change the linens."

~E~

It was a good while before any real news reached her, and it arrived in the form of her Commander General. Mertok looked professional as ever, but the furrow of his brow was much more severe than usual.

"Please give me some good news." Elsa said, without much hope.

The General took a few seconds before answering. "I am sorry my Queen. It â€œ pains me to report a personal failure of mine."

Elsa closed her eyes and pushed her palm into her forehead in a vain attempt to relieve the cluster headache building there. She took a breath. "What happened?"

"Our captive spy."

"What of him?"

"He was murdered last night."

Elsa took to rubbing her temples in a vain attempt to stave off the headache.

"Tell me more."

"Little is known. It seems that in the commotion caused by the Chief's arrest, someone slipped by the guards and planted a knife between his ribs."

"This just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?"

Shad, it seemed, had nothing to say to that.

Elsa tried to think. "Who was the last to see him alive? Did anyone see something?"

"We're still piecing together what happened and when. We haven't talked to all the guards yet. The last person to have seen him in his cell was me, not long before he was killed."

"You?"

He nodded. "Indeed. I did say that I would be overseeing this personally."

That ruled out that line of questioning, then.

"I see. Keep trying to find out what happened. This means that whoever was behind the attacks still has agents in the city, perhaps even in the castle. Keep me posted."

"As you wish, my Queen." He bowed and strode purposely out of her slowly thawing doors.

Not too long after Mertok's departure, she was informed that the Chief had regained consciousness. She'd had the forethought to place Ernie in the room, in the hopes that the young man would be able to keep the Chief docile without the need for guards to confine him. She did not know how much of his friendship with the servant was genuine, but she had nothing to lose. Ernie would be safe.

Finally collected and somewhat calm, she ordered that the Chief be interrogated on the event, politely.

After that, she called one of her guards and asked him to bring the captain in charge of the investigation to her.

The man came, she did not think she had dealt with him personally before. He was sweaty and tired and wearing a crumpled uniform. He stood, somewhat awkwardly, to attention in front of her desk.

"My Queen."

"Why don't I have the names of the dead yet, Captain? I need them to proceed."

"I am afraid we have made little progress as of yet, my Queen."

She frowned. "What do you mean? How hard can it be identify the bodies?"

He looked troubled, shifting awkwardly under her gaze. "We've tried, but no one from any of the barracks have been reported missing. No civilians appear gone. We brought in the Staff Supervisor to try and identify the footmen, but he could not."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that whoever these soldiers were, they weren't part of the city's garrison."

Elsa frowned.

"Did we have any dispatches from the provinces staying in the city?"

"We thought about that. Nothing in the records."

"Anything else of note?"

"Nothing yet, your majesty."

"Thank you. Dismissed."

He bowed and left, quickly.

Elsa didn't know what to think, suddenly the situation seemed far less clear. Who were they, if they weren't from the city garrison? They could be from a regiment stationed elsewhere in Arendelle, but if that was the case there would be a record of their presence in the city. And if they were simply visiting on their own time, why were they in uniform?

She had the sinking feeling that she was missing something here. Many things, in fact. She had no clue who these men were, or what situation had lead to the slaughter of eight of her subjects.

The Chief's actions made no sense, either. Why kill a few soldiers and civilians? He lived in the castle. His dragon lived in the castle. He had access to everyone of importance, up to and including her. Why those people? What was so special about them? She didn't know. The soldiers didn't exist, and the civilians apparently weren't local, because no one had been reported missing. Granted, only a few hours had passed, but half the city had heard a version of the night's events by now, at least a few of them should have been reported missing by now.

She took to looking over, for the umpteenth time, the hastily scribbled reports on the crime scene. The officer in charge had noted the curious amount of weapons at the scene, too many for the number of uniformed bodies. In fact, each corpse was found next to a weapon, even the civilians. Additionally, two high end crossbows had been found at the scene. It was obvious that there was a fight. Not simply a fight, but an actual, prolonged engagement.

Which begged the question, why would a civilian fight? Against a dragon, of all things? Her first thought had been that the Chief had slaughtered them before they had time to flee, but the alley opened up at either end and one of the corpses was retrieved from a roof. She could not picture a scenario in which the civilians could not have escaped, at least some of them. Or was that what happened? Were there witnesses out there, even now, terrified after having narrowly escaped death by dragon?

That still did not explain the additional weapons. It was not illegal for civilians to carry weapons in Arendelle, but it was highly unusual. Maybe the soldiers were carrying them? But then, what? Did they pass them around when it became obvious that a fight was inevitable? That made no sense, either.

Maybe she was seeing this from the wrong perspective. The Chief had been arrested for violating the terms of his stay by outright killing her subjects. But she had nothing confirming these corpses as her subjects besides their clothes. On the other hand, Arendellian clothing was distinctive and could not be confused. Moreover, Arendelle was a port city, and housed many that did not permanently live here. The fact that she could not immediately identify them did not say much. The mystery of the soldiers was curious, but not enough by itself to give answers.

She needed to know more. Uncertainty had no place in a situation where she had eight corpses and the captured leader of a dragon-riding nation.

Another guard soon arrived.

"Report." She demanded impatiently. The guard bowed, before speaking.

She did her best to think of him as simply 'Chief' rather than 'Hiccup', as she'd taken to calling him in her head, lately. She didn't need to waver, right now.

"Have you questioned him?"

"We have. Still are, I believe."

"And? What did he say?"

"He was â€œ uncooperative. His aide was able to pacify him upon awakening, and his wounds were quite confining, but he was very angry."

"I didn't ask you about his feelings, soldier. I asked you what he said."

"He kept asking about the dragon, ignoring our questions. When the aide informed him that the beast is unharmed, he told us a little."

"And that was?"

"That he was attacked, and that he demands the immediate release of both himself and the dragon."

"Attacked?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"He said that?"

"He did."

"I see â€œ Anything else?"

He shook his head. "As I said, he was not cooperative. He looked very worried about the dragon, and angry. Our orders were to do nothing beyond ask him questions."

And that was good. Despite the situation, she dared not mistreat him during his incarceration. If there was a chance for Arendelle to avoid a war with a nation that has tamed dragons, it was imperative that the Chief not be harmed until negotiations were completed. It was the only reason he wasn't currently being uncooperative from within the confines of her dungeons.

Much as she hated to let politics affect her judgement, she was treading a very thin line. Berk had, assuming the information she'd gleaned from Hiccup in the Bath-house was valid, been co-existing with dragons for only five years. However, with the only example she

had being the Chief and Toothless, she could not rule out the possibility of full-scale integration, even in such a small time frame. And she did not like those odds.

"Have the investigation team look into the victims until they find something. They must be able to identify them somehow. Their clothes, any personal belongings on their person, anything. Also, I want the weapons found on sight looked into. Tell me where they came from."

"As you command, my Queen."

She dismissed the guard, who left her to her thoughts.

As for the Chief's claim of being attacked â€“ well, what else would he say? It was the knee-jerk reaction of anyone being caught doing something they're not supposed to. '_It wasn't my fault, he started it_'. All that is easy to claim when the opposition is unable to refute. She could not take his word for it, or anything else. She'd been a fool to, before.

Despite her diligent work, the next breakthrough in the case arrived several hours later, and from a most unlikely source.

"Anna?" Elsa asked, surprise coloring her voice as her sister walked back into the office, looking much more haggard and rumpled. Elsa hadn't seen her sister in such a state in â€“ quite some time. Despite her tired and worn appearance, she had a look of badly contained excitement.

"I did it, sister!"

"Did what? What happened?"

"I managed to rule out those people!"

Elsa blinked in confusion. "You're not making any sense, Anna. Take this slower. Does it have anything to do with the detachment of soldiers you asked for?"

"You bet it has."

"Those weren't for your personal protection?"

Anna looked almost affronted. "My personal-, no! Why would I need a single guard, never mind the dozens I took, no. I used them to scour the entire city. All of it."

Elsa's brow furrowed. It was possible, theoretically, to go through the entire city of Arendelle with that many soldiers in a few hours. The city in itself wasn't that big. "You decided to wake up the entire city? Why?"

Her look of triumph was about to escape her thin thread of control, Elsa could tell.

"I asked everyone if anyone was missing. Every house, every inn. No one is missing, Elsa. No one is missing." She repeated the statement, putting as much emphasis as she feasibly could.

Elsa tilted her head to the side, trying to see where Anna was going with this through the haze of her exhaustion.

"That doesn't prove much. We already knew there were no reported disappearances. Arendelle has the largest harbour on the entire coastline Anna. There are plenty of people that end up here that would not be missed in a day, or at all for that matter."

"What I just proved is that everyone that is officially in the city is accounted for. But that's not all! We also scoured the Customs and Tolls offices. You know that every entrant into the city needs to be registered. There was no record of the dead people. Whoever they were, they didn't come to the city through legitimate channels."

Elsa's eyes narrowed. Now she could see where her sister was going with this.

"You took a detachment of our troops and awoke the entire city for this?"

Anna frowned, her enthusiasm curbed for the first time since she entered. "Why is that such a problem? Dawn has passed by now. In any case, it's more important to prove Hiccup innocent than it is to avoid the people being mildly uncomfortable for a few minutes."

"You â€| you insist on defending him? Even now?" Elsa asked.

"The real question is why are you so quick to condemn him?"

Elsa's anger flared. "I have to face reality, Anna. I can't play favorites and ignore facts when people are dead."

By now, Elsa had risen and walked around her desk. Anna looked at her, and her little sister suddenly looked older and angrier than she'd ever seen her.

"On the contrary, I believe you're very willing to ignore facts because you're afraid of what Hiccup could be."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"He's not Hans, Elsa." she said quietly, her voice steady.

Elsa stilled. "What did you say?"

"Hiccup is not Hans." She repeated levelly, holding her ground in the face of Elsa's ice cold anger. "That's what you've been thinking isn't it? Same playbook, different prince? He arrives here, and we let him into our lives. He gains our friendship, gains our trust ... except this time it's not your idiot kid sister who's been tricked into falling in lo-"

The slap came instantly, forcing Anna's head to turn with the momentum of her palm. Though instinctual, it was thankfully not very strong. Elsa's mind, previously burning with anger, now flushed with shock at what she had done. So surprised was Anna, that for a moment there was complete silence. Her eyes, bright with moisture, bore into Elsa's.

"Are you sure it's not your pride that's been hurt, Elsa?" She said in the echoing silence, igniting Elsa's anger once more. "I can count on one hand the amount of people you've truly let into your life, but Hiccup got under your skin. Something made you trust him. Arendelle's legendary Snow Queen, charmed and betrayed by a barbarian boy." Anna took a step forward until she was almost nose to nose with her sister.

"You're taking this too far." Elsa warned, voice shaking. Anna ignored her.

"Is that it, Elsa? Are you afraid of what the people will say? Or is this you lashing out at your first chance for something different?"

"Just because you got your happy ending doesn't give you the right to interfere in my life."

"I'm your sister. Someone needs to knock it into your thick skull that just because you're a queen and have magical powers doesn't mean you'll always be alone!"

Elsa's reply was cut-off by someone loudly clearing their throat. Both sisters turned and levelled their glares at the Commander General, who was standing at the door and looked extremely uncomfortable.

Anna whirled round and stormed out of the open door, a livid handprint blooming across her cheek.

Mertok stepped hurriedly out of her way before sliding into Elsa's office. Elsa stared after her sister's retreating back.

"What now?" Elsa snapped.

"There are news, my Queen."

"Speak." She said as she regained her composure, the temperature lifting a few degrees as she did so.

"One of our guards managed to identify one of the fallen."

Finally, a breakthrough.

"Yes? Who was it?"

"He recognised one victim as having been part of the Grandlandian delegation."

Elsa's eyes widened.

"This just got far more complicated. We'll need some kind of confirmation, or at least a decent degree of certainty. If that is true â€¦" She didn't finish her sentence, as the consequences were too numerous and too terrible to mention.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Shad asked.

"Possibly." She said. "We need to talk about this. I assume you have the appropriate people figuring this out?"

"With this new possibility in mind, yes. We are checking our armories for lost weapons and such, since the weapons found bore our insignia."

"Any progress on that?"

"Several small thefts reported in the last year could be responsible, though the crossbows seem to have been recently stolen. It is not certain if they are the same pieces, however, as their mark number has been scratched out."

"I see."

There was not much else to consider. Elsa palmed her face and closed her eyes as she tried to sort out her thoughts.

"Call a meeting."

Shad nodded, and bowed before turning to leave.

Within the next half hour, all the members of her inner council arrived and sat themselves around her office, exchanging crisp greetings and looking tired and sleepy.

When everyone was assembled, Elsa threaded her fingers and looked at each one in turn.

"The country of Arendelle," she begun "is in the unenviable position of being infiltrated by Grandlandian agents. Moreover, we have slighted, for the second time, the Chief of a Viking tribe that has dragons for allies."

Pandemonium erupted.

~E~

Several hours later, with the sun steadily climbing, Elsa found herself walking alone towards the guest rooms where the Chief was held, a thick stack of papers on her arms.

She and her council had conferred for some time, after which she'd managed to catch a brief nap, bathe, eat something and neatened herself up. Her hair no longer looked like she'd just gotten out of bed, her dress was not crumpled or sweat stained.. Her handmaidens had attempted to conceal the dark bags under her eyes with make up, but there was nothing to be done for their redness.

Part of her-a significant one, too-was terrified. If Anna was indeed right, as recent revelations seemed to imply, then she had once again attacked the leader of a dragon-riding nation. Granted, she was well within her rights to detain and question him after coming across such a scene, until the situation had been assessed, regardless of whose fault the engagement was, but she doubted that he would view it as such.

Any favour she had gained whilst Hiccup had been her guest had undoubtedly been lost by last night's events. Justified as she still felt for initially detaining him, she knew that from his point of view he and his dragon had been attacked, injured and then arrested

in the city he had been guaranteed safety in, all by people wearing her livery, no less. He was going to be angry, justifiably so. Once again she was on a political back foot with him.

And, to make a bad situation even worse, Grandland was involved somehow. Her country was being infiltrated either by Grandlandian agents or defectors, and she had not been aware of it. The latter possibility meant merely-and she used the term loosely- that defectors had managed to infiltrate her city and ambush the Chief. The former possibility was even more troubling. Grandland had undoubtedly heard the news that a dragon tamer had appeared in Arendelle. If they risked her wrath to capture or kill her personal guest in her capital city, that meant that they had plans for Hiccup. What a country like Grandland would want with a dragon tamer, she shuddered to think.

The small part of her that wasn't currently consumed with worry about the future of her country, was oddly relieved. It was a weary kind of relief, leaving her mentally tired.

Hating the Chief, for however long it had lasted, had been oddly exhausting. It was relieving to see that she had not been wrong, that he really was the good man that she had slowly come to think of him as. That she had not misjudged so terribly. That she had not been steadily developing feelings for a deceiver and a murderer.

Oh, she knew that Hiccup had both lied and killed before. She'd been on the business end of his lies, and almost lost her life to his blade. Even so, he was a man of morals, and acted with the best interests of his nation in mind, something she could understand and respect.

Elsa sighed. Anna was right, damn it all. It had hurt her pride when she thought that Hiccup had managed to make her fall for the same trick that naive, 14 year old Anna had, thus leaving her kingdom vulnerable to scheming foreign powers once again. She'd always considered herself smarter than that. She didn't think that she ever fully trusted him, not completely, not yet. But he had managed to get her to drop her guard. He'd made her feel... different, as Anna had put it.

It was this understanding that made her next task incredibly hard. How to fix things? That had been one of the two topics of conversation between her and her council. God willing, he would listen to her.

She reached the doors and nodded to the guards, who bowed and opened them for her.

The interior was well furnished, if a little bland, considering the lack of personal decorations. Before the Chief's incarceration, the rooms were uninhabited. She saw on the bedside table several bloody bandages before her gaze was inevitably drawn to the viking.

Hiccup was sitting in the wooden chair in front of the empty desk, turned around so that it was facing the door. He was leaning forward, supporting his elbows on his thighs and his head on his hands.

"Leave us." She commanded to the two guards who were, up until now,

keeping careful vigil over him. She could see them hesitate to leave the two of them alone, but they obeyed her. As soon as she approached, he rose.

Elsa noticed the bandages covering most of his arms, and though she could not see beneath the Chief's tunic, his limp was tell enough of his injured knees.

She let her eyes land on his face last, dreading what she would see there. He said nothing, but the set of his jaw and the fierce look in his eyes betrayed how utterly furious he was with her at that moment.

She stilled, halfway inside the room, and let him close the last of the distance. His limp made him no less menacing as he stalked across the room towards her. She did not allow herself to take a step back, but for a moment she wanted to.

She did not get the chance to speak first.

"Take me to Toothless." He demanded. She started slightly, thrown by the suddenness of his statement and his forceful tone. She was acutely reminded of the last time she'd heard that cold, hard tone from him. When she was lying on the snow and he held her life in his hands.

She mentally shook herself and focused back on what she had come to do.

"We need to talk." She said.

"Take me to Toothless." He said, slower this time, emphasising every word, lacing them in equal parts warning and barely-restrained fury.

Elsa considered for a few seconds, but in the end could do nothing else if she wanted to ever get Hiccup to listen to her. She nodded curtly.

"Follow me."

She turned and exited, mindful to walk a little slower so he could keep up without hurting himself. He walked stiffly next to her, not even turning to glance her way.

She motioned the guards who made to follow them away, and led the Chief through the main areas of the castle. They walked in silence down service corridors towards the cavernous storage halls. They had chosen to keep the dragon's icy prison there, due in no small part to its proximity to the gates and the width of its door.

The doors to the room they stopped in front of had four guards stationed outside. They stood to attention as she approached.

"Is he inside?" He asked.

"Yes."

A guard opened one part of the door, and she let him enter first, before following.

Toothless' prison took up more than half of the space. Elsa stopped, just inside the door, but the Chief kept on, walking until he had reached it. He set a hand on the ice and stared at it for a few seconds, though Elsa knew that the ice was thick enough that he could not possibly see his dragon inside it.

"He is perfectly healthy." She informed him. "The ice put him in stasis, but when I melt it he won't be any worse for wear."

He said nothing for a few seconds, his hand tracing the strange runes inscribed into the dark ice. "Did you have any trouble holding him?"

She did not expect that question. Should she be honest, or try to play up her abilities?

That dilemma didn't last long.

"Some." She admitted. "Early on he began glowing, and almost broke out. I had to reinforce the ice."

That seemed to surprise him enough to make him finally look at her, and for a moment he looked more curious than angry.

"You kept him through his Titan Wing mode? That's very impressive."

She fiddled with her braid to hide her awkwardness at the unexpected praise, and he returned to looking at the ice block.

"You should not be here when he is released."

It took only a moment to realize what he meant. If the dragon was unfrozen in her presence, she had little doubt that he would attack her.

On the other hand, she did not want to leave the Chief's presence before they got to discuss.

Catching on to her hesitation, Hiccup looked at her again.

"We will talk, after he is freed. Just ~~be~~ go."

She hesitated a moment longer. "I imagine that Toothless will be ~~be~~ upset, about ~~be~~ all this."

He snorted. "That's a fair summation."

"I need you to guarantee that he will not be a danger to anyone, if I free him here, within the confines of the castle."

"He won't be. You have my word."

She nodded, though he could not see, having turned away again. She left the room, closing the door behind her and leaning against it. She closed her eyes and focused, willing the ice to melt.

Soon, Toothless' angry roars echoed from inside the storeroom, and she had to calm the guards who immediately went for their weapons.

She heard Hiccup's voice, at first urgent, so as to attract the dragon's attention, but then soothing. The dragon stopped roaring, and she could not hear Hiccup's soft-spoken words to it through the door.

For about twenty minutes Hiccup was inside, saying god-knows-what to his dragon. Eventually, the door opened and he slipped outside, looking much calmer than earlier.

"We can talk now." He told her. She nodded, and lead the way to her office. Where at any other time they would chat amiably about this and that, the silence now hung heavy between them.

When they arrived, Elsa opted against sitting behind her desk, instead taking one of the two chairs in front of it and motioning for him to take the other. He did so, movements crisp.

Now â€œ! where to begin?

"I hope you understand the necessity of your arrest." She said. His glare returned, though much less venomous than when she first saw him earlier today.

"Was knocking me out necessary? Was freezing Toothless necessary, too?" His nasal, sarcastic tone had a rather sharper edge to it than usual.

"Yes" She looked at him levelly. "Hiccup, when I found you, you were surrounded by the slaughtered bodies of what appeared to be Arendellian soldiers and civilians. The situation had to be contained, and quickly. I had no other way of containing Toothless without a lot of people getting hurt. Rumours travel faster than the truth. As it is, I have spent most of the night convincing some very important people that this situation does not mean we are at war with Berk."

"None of this was my fault."

Elsa raised a hand. "I know, and I am sorry that I could not simply take your word for it at the time, but laws are laws and your arrest was unavoidable. There were many people who were not happy about my decision to let a dragon to stay in the middle of the city. At first it appeared you and Toothless had proven them right last night." She looked down, away from his angry eyes for a moment.

"Truth be told, when I saw the bodiesâ€œ! For a while there I thought that that they had been right. I am sorry Hiccup, I really am." She didn't quite dare look back up at his face.

He didn't say anything for a while, seething quietly, and she changed the subject before the silence crushed her. "Before we discuss this any further, I need you to tell me exactly what happened."

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Despite appearances, my investigations have shown that the men you fought and killed were not Arendellian soldiers. As to why you should tell me, understand that this took place in my city, and you yourself are my guest. I need to know what happened."

He didn't say anything for a while, but his glare did not lessen.

"As I said to your interrogators, I was attacked."

"We figured as much." She said patiently. She could understand his petulant attitude in light of what had happened. Frankly, she had not expected a great deal of cooperation, coming into this. "But I need details. In return, I'll tell you all that we know about the men that attacked you."

That seemed to do the trick, as information on his attackers was probably something he wanted.

She let him gather his thoughts for a while.

"The leader was slightly taller than me," He began slowly. "Skin tone slightly darker than you usually see around here. Hair a dark, dirty blond. He waited until I was outside the castle, and he and another man approached me, dressed as your footmen. He claimed that you had sent them to get me, and demanded that Toothless stay behind. I refused, and they reluctantly agreed. We followed them up until the alley, at which point we were surrounded and they attacked. You know the rest."

Elsa inwardly marvelled at the way his anger seemed to bleed out of him as he spoke. She took careful note of everything he said, in order to repeat it word for word to the appropriate people, later.

"I see."

"Now, tell me who it was."

"We are not certain, mind." She cautioned. "But the man you described as the leader was part of the Grandlandian delegation, some time ago."

"What are you thinking?"

"Defectors, best case. Worst, infiltrators."

"What are you doing about it?"

"All we can."

"Maybe you should ask your Commander General. He seemed pretty buddy-buddy with the Ambassador when last I saw them."

Elsa narrowed her eyes.

"General Mertok has been an invaluable part of Arendelle since before I was born. You'd do well not to doubt him in my presence."

"Right, of course." He said, before letting out a sigh and rubbing his eyes in a display of weariness that Elsa would not have expected him to show. "Is that all? Can I go now?"

Elsa was taken aback. She hadn't even showed him the papers yet. Was that the extent of his anger? Had she been worrying over his reaction

for no reason?

"Where to, if I may ask?"

"To gather my things, of course."

Apparently no, she hadn't been worrying over nothing.

"You're leaving?" She asked, the shock in her tone surprising even herself.

His eyes widened a fraction. "You don't really expect me to stay here any longer than I have to, do you?"

She was, actually. "I was hoping you'd stay."

"Twice now you and your men have attacked me, and I nearly died to an ambush by what is clearly your_enemies. You'd even promised that no harm would befall me or Toothless, yet did not hesitate to break that promise yourself. No, I think I've seen enough of Arendelle's hospitality, thank you very much."

If Elsa hadn't expected to hear such words from him from the very beginning, she might have been hurt. As it were, she was adequately prepared mentally.

"Now if that will be all, I think I will be going."

He rose, and made to walk away. Rude, perhaps, to walk out on a queen without permission, but such was the furthest from both their minds. She hadn't expected him to attempt his exit so quickly. She rose, too, and impulsively grasped hold of his wrist as he made to pass her by.

"Wait." She said.

He looked at her, and she could tell he barely held back from snapping at her or tearing his hand free. As it was, he looked at her, expectantly.

With her free hand, she passed him the documents she and her council had prepared. He released his hand from her grip with a jerk, and took them. He perused them quickly, and she could see his eyes widen more and more as he read on.

"What is this?" He asked, almost rhetorically.

"The trade agreement between Arendelle and Berk I was planning to propose to you, revised in light of last night's offense against you."

He took a few more minutes examining it, backtracking to previous pages several times, his eyes scanning every paper carefully.

"These are some concessions." He admitted.

"Are they enough?" She asked quietly, her eyes searching his face for an answer. She hoped they were, because she would offer nothing else.

He took some time to think of a reply, having stacked the papers again and holding them in his hand. Elsa took an involuntary step closer, already frayed nerves pulsing anxiously.

"Why would you go so far â€¢?" Hiccup wondered aloud, voice low. "Why would you tie your kingdom to an agreement not beneficial enough, just to keep me here a while longer?"

And what could she say to that? The concessions mostly involved tipping the exchange rate in Berk's favor. Not a huge advantage by itself, but one that would stack over time. She'd sold the council on these concessions by playing the 'about to be invaded by dragons' card, but she knew very well that Hiccup would never do that. Oh she had entertained the possibility, when she had thought him capable of murdering her subjects, but without that event to throw his character in doubt she knew he would not consider war over a personal slight. And sure, her own pride as a Queen demanded that the Chief be repaid for being attacked even after she had guaranteed his safety, but even that was not the entire reason.

So, where did that leave her? How could she explain her thought process when she barely understood it, herself? How could she explain feelings that she was just now beginning to realize she had?

She could see Hiccup look at her expectantly as the seconds passed by and she said nothing. Perhaps she was overthinking things. She tended to do that in high-stress situations, she knew.

What would Anna do?

Almost without thought, she took the small step necessary to bridge the distance between them, took light hold of his shoulders, stood on her toes, closed her eyes, and kissed him.

It was almost surreal, that she managed to do what she did without being intercepted. Hiccup had two clear seconds, the time that it took her to reach him and take hold, in which he could have done something. Did he not believe she would do something like that, had he been curious as to what she would do? Had she caught him completely by surprise?

Whichever the reason for her unimpeded path, she was now undeniably lip-locked with him.

For a few seconds, a few glorious seconds, he kissed her right back. Their lips moved in harmony, exchanging concepts and feelings that words failed to. His hands found their way to her waist and her hair and for a moment pulled her closer to him, the contact sending Elsa's senses reeling in a very enjoyable fashion.

The almost magical reverie was broken, however, when Hiccup seemed to snap out of whatever it was driving him to kissing her back. The hands previously holding her so passionately instead pushed her away. He backpedalled, stumbling onto a chair and nearly falling, flailing his arms to regain his balance.

Elsa would have moved to assist, but she was too busy being frozen on the spot, one hand on her lips, her mind utterly blank as she fully realized what she had done. If the heat she could feel radiating off her face was any indication, she must have turned completely

scarlet.

Hiccup, finally stabilized, looked completely lost. "That was â€œ!" He did not finish his sentence, and she doubted she could have, either.

That was so much better than her first kiss to that priceling, a couple years ago. This was â€œ! this was â€œ! she couldn't really describe it, either.

"What-, what was-, _why_?" Hiccup stammered, finally drawing her focus back to him instead of her inner thoughts. He looked â€œ! bewildered?

"What do you mean why?"

"What was that? Why would you-, I don't understand. Was that the plan? To keep me here with promises of affection?"

For the second time that night her hand had moved before she had even registered the desire for it to, and next thing she knew Hiccup was holding a palm against his cheek, which was reddening rapidly. It took her a few seconds for her to realize that she had slapped him.

"Ouch." he groaned. "Okay, I deserved that. That was stupid, I'm sorry."

"You â€œ! you â€œ! you berk! I â€œ! do you think so little of me that you think that would be my motivation?"

"I just â€œ! You confuse me, Elsa. I can't do this anymore, I don't want to. I don't want to wonder if I can trust you or not, or about the motivations behind your actions, or whether you mean something you do or say. I'm tired of this â€œ! of this little game between us. You've won. I'm done."

He took a step back, carefully this time, and gathered the papers that lay scattered on the floor.

"I will take these, and rework them into something that's fair, but don't ask me to stay. It would do nothing but complicate things further."

No. Elsa could not accept that. She would not.

"You will need my input, and there is no established messenger line between Arendelle and Berk. Furthermore, there is the matter of the map that you have yet to deliver, and the matter of your officer arriving soon. What about those?"

Flimsy excuses, she knew. From the looks of it, he knew it, too, because he seemed ready to disagree. She spoke again before he had the chance.

"Besides, whatever your feelings about how I handled the aftermath, these attackers were after you. We need to know who they were and why they wanted you. You need to know whether the mastermind behind this attack is a threat to Berk as much as I need to find out if they mean harm to Arendelle. You can only find that out by helping us

investigate here, in the city. I assure you, we will do everything we can."

She almost had him, she knew. With how off balance he was right now, she could read his face like an open book. All he needed was one last push.

"Please." She said quietly. "Stay."

And there. His conflicted look gave way to resignation, as he let out a weary sigh and rubbed at his eyes.

"Fine." He said. She repressed the smile that threatened to bloom, in light of his defeated look. That's not what she wanted to see.

Then he turned and walked away, making it all the way to the door before she found her voice again.

"Hiccup!"

He stopped, and looked at her over his shoulder.

She hesitated, struggling to find words to ask the question that was eating away at her. In the end she could not, and the silence stretched on.

Hiccup left, closing the door behind him, and Elsa slumped bonelessly in a chair.

Well, that could have gone better.

~E~

She didn't see him for the rest of the day. Which was understandable, considering how busy both of them had been.

The official story, the one that she had her agents and officials spread as soon as she left her office after the Chief's departure, was a twisted version of the truth that barely resembled what really happened.

Truth was one of the first things a politician sacrificed.

According to the official story, the Chief and his dragon were walking in the streets of Arendelle when he was cowardly attacked by an unspecified number of unknown assailants. He bravely defended himself, managing to dispatch his attackers, though not without sustaining injuries of his own. Arrendelian forces arrived at the scene soon after and secured the Chief from the area, while investigations began on the source of the attack.

Predictably, the public outcry was immense. All of Arendelle now demanded the mastermind of this attack be caught immediately. A visiting royal had been ambushed in Arendelle's own capital? The shame was too much, and was only overshadowed by the ensuing anger.

No mention of the fact that the attackers were using Arendellian equipment was made. No one knew, besides the guards that had been present and since sworn to secrecy, that the Chief had actually been

apprehended by Elsa's guards, rather violently at that, nor that for the longest time he was considered the main suspect for the whole incident. If they'd known the truth, that anger would be directed inwards, towards her and her government rather than outwards. Despite the public's willingness to believe the worst in the hours after the attack, the fact was Hiccup had become very popular with her townsfolk over the last few weeks.

The Chief could, if he revealed the truth, screw them over royally, but Elsa was confident that he would not. Even if such an act was not beneath him, as she believed, she was confident that her rather generous trade agreement would be enough to convince him to go along with her official version of events.

When reports of the Chief's latest activities reached her, she could not repress a small, knowing smile. She'd judged correctly. The Chief, still visibly bandaged and limping, had taken a walk around the middle of the city, surrounded by the, surprisingly many, acquaintances and friends he'd made during his stay here, and rather pointedly supported the official version of events. Her version.

Maybe he would ask something for it, later. The fact of the matter was that, for now, the situation was being handled.

The rest of the day was, still, damage control. Steering the rumors in the right direction, assuring foreign officials that they were perfectly safe and superfluously moving troops around so as to appear that they were tightening security. Not that it wasn't actually being tightened, just that it happened in less visible ways and the public needed some tangible show of strength.

Her fastest rider was dispatched. He was to head straight for Grandland's capital. He was carrying a message, but it wasn't for the Grandlandian government, oh no. It was meant to be received by the Arendellian ambassador there, and ordered him to quietly pack his stuff and withdraw, seeing as tensions were escalating and his safety could no longer be guaranteed.

Court was held, but it was mostly a repetition of the official statement by her, in front of the Courtiers and the visitors. Hiccup was there, and he accepted the various well-wishers gracefully.

Her furious row with Anna still weighed heavily on her. If not for her immense workload, she would have been much more worried about it. As it was, she only had time to think about it well after the sun had set and her minimal sleep in the last 48 hours caught up to her. As she went about her chambers, preparing for some much needed rest, the still unresolved matter came to the forefront of her mind.

Being siblings with vastly different personalities, arguments between them were not at all uncommon. They always bickered about this or that, irritating and annoying each other. Anna with her incessant teasing, and Elsa with her curt dismissals. But this was different. This was much more serious than a petty argument.

Anna's words had hit their mark. They had meant to hurt and they had cut deep. Never before had she been provoked to the point of instinctual, physical violence. Granted, the slap was sloppy and probably hurt Anna's pride more than her cheek, but it was the act

itself that was unforgivable.

Having been raised from birth to rule, and from the age of six to completely control her emotional reactions, violence of the physical kind had never been part of Elsa's upbringing. Her destructive potential had been considered far too dangerous to allow such an unpredictable outlet. To her knowledge, that was the first time she had physically struck someone, and now she had done it twice in the same day. This was a violation of not only royal decorum but also of her own self-imposed limits.

But was what Anna had done any less unforgivable? Deliberately she had aimed at Elsa's old insecurities, things that she knew Elsa still had not forgiven herself for, things she only knew because Elsa had confided in her, and only her. Could that breach of Elsa's trust be forgiven so easily?

She let out a tired sigh. If Anna could forgive her, then she could certainly forgive Anna. She could not afford to alienate her sister right now, even for a little while. She needed her support. She'd swallow her bruised pride at Anna's low blows, and apologize to her tomorrow at breakfast.

She slept like a brick, and the next thing she knew it was dawn and she was getting up. She was the first to arrive for breakfast, and as the servants milled about, preparing the table she pondered the best way to talk to her sister.

Curiously, she heard Hiccup's voice from outside the door.

"Really though, there's no need-"

He was interrupted by Anna, who was clearly irritated, judging by her voice.

"Nonsense. We haven't had you for breakfast in a while. I insist."

The door opened and allowed the both of them in. Anna was almost dragging Hiccup by the hand, who threw her a half bewildered, half apologetic look over Anna's head. Elsa only had a smile for that. Anna could be more stubborn than a mule, when she set her mind on something.

With Hiccup there, her plans to apologize to Anna-a deeply personal act- were postponed. The atmosphere was rather awkward, in light of recent events, many of which Anna did not yet know. Her sister made a valiant effort to kick off conversation and keep it going, with moderate success, but soon breakfast was over and everyone parted ways. Hiccup left with Ernie, and she headed to her office.

She did, however, make space in her schedule for one whole hour free, in which to talk to Anna. It needed to be done, and she'd be damned if she allowed it to be postponed indefinitely or until it no longer mattered.

When Anna arrived in her office, she found her in front of her desk, hands clasped in a show of anxiety.

Anna looked at her, assessing her mood.

"Hey Elsa."

"Hey." Elsa said, mechanically, before taking a deep breath, "I wanted to apologize." She paused, looking her sister in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

Anna smiled sadly. "I will forgive you, if you forgive me. The things I said were uncalled for. I was way over the line."

"I should never have hit you."

"Pretty sure I deserved it." Anna said. "Still friends?"

Foregoing an answer, Elsa embraced her sister, wrapping her arms around her. Anna returned the gesture and Elsa sighed in relief. She needed Anna, especially now. Her sister's support and love had carried her through many tough situations, and she didn't know what she'd do without them.

When they separated, a small smile played on Elsa's lips.

"You weren't completely wrong, you know."

Anna raised a curious eyebrow. After a few seconds of Elsa's silence, her eyes widened. "What did you do?"

"You'll never guess it."

"What did you do, Elsa?"

"Care to at least try?"

Anna waved her hands in frustration, no doubt wracking her brain but finding no satisfactory answer. Elsa's smile widened.

"Elsa, I'm dying here!"

Elsa let her stew for a while more, savoring her anguished look, before finally coming out with it.

"I kissed him."

Anna just blinked at her for a few seconds, mouth agape, before she managed to regain her voice.

"You- are you joking?"

"That only made Elsa's smile transform into a full-blown grin.
"Nope."

"You kissed him?"

"Sure did."

She seemed to need a few more seconds to process this, before a huge grin broke out in her face.

"You kissed him!" Before Elsa had time to point out that she had, in fact, just said that, Anna had enveloped her in a crushing hug,

laughing maniacally as she did so.

"Just when I think I have you figured out, you go and pull that kind of stuff."

"I have to keep you on your toes _somehow_."

"Tell me _everything_."

Elsa proceeded to recount her conversation with Hiccup to Anna, patiently clarifying whatever little questions Anna had which ranged from her motives to his expressions and a plethora of other, seemingly random things.

Upon conclusion, much of the good cheer had vanished. The reality of the situation was not as pleasant as it had at first appeared to.

"What will you do now?" Anna asked when Elsa was finished. She shrugged her shoulders.

"What can I do? My cards, as they say, are on the table. It's his move, now."

"I'm sure he'll come around." Anna said sympathetically.

"Maybe he will, maybe he won't. Regardless, I won't lose any sleep over it. I've done my part. I have bigger concerns right now."

"Is the situation really that worrisome?"

"The council seems to agree that things with Grandland will get worse. The probability of the attackers being state sanctioned is too high."

"How bad could it be?"

"That's the problem. We don't know yet. We don't know their motivation in this attack or in their probable attempt on my life. We have always had a cordial, if rocky, relationship with Grandland. Decent trading connections. Whatever they hope to gain by their actions they are prepared to sacrifice all of that to gain it. Or at least, " Elsa admitted "Some part of their government quite probably is, assumptions cannot be made at this stage. "

Anna frowned a little and looked up at the ceiling in thought.

"I wonder" she said slowly "Could the cause of all this be to do withâ€¦ well, you and Hiccup?"

Elsa looked at her in surprise. "Whatever do you mean? Nothing passed between us till this very morning."

"Elsa," said Anna levelly " I sometimes don't know if you realize this, but you are scary powerful when it comes to your ice magic, a fact you aptly demonstrated to all of our neighbors a few years ago. Now in addition to an ice sorceress as a Queen we have had the leader of the only known dragon riding nation staying as your personal guest these last few weeks. Should the two of you form a military alliance, or worst, marry- "

"Or worst marry" she repeated over Elsa's spluttering "- oh hush, Elsa. You're both young and single, there will be speculation of such an alliance. Well, you can see why even our allies are going to be nervous right now. With your magic and his dragon army you could build an empire running from here to the Casertian sea, who would be able to stop you? Perhaps the Grandlandian government simply means to neutralize the threat before you become completely unstoppable."

Elsa stared at her sister in astonishment at this unexpected insight. "I sometimes forget the formidable brain you have." she said, tapping Anna lightly on the head, "You hide it so well most of the time."

"Thank- hey!"

Anna stayed for the full hour and they talked. It was invigorating, as always, but in the end her duties called and Anna herself had stuff to do.

Hours passed. Work, lunch, more work, a brief respite, then work once again. Court was not scheduled today, so her evening was spent in her office.

To her surprise, worked into her evening schedule of appointments was Hiccup himself. It was the first time they'd met in such a way, which was unusual in itself because scheduled appointments were how meetings with foreign officials were normally conducted.

He had taken pains to arrange this meeting through bureaucratic channels, and Elsa judged that his visit was purely work-related. Indeed, the Chief had brought with him the brand-new and completed map of the Viking Archipelago, as he called it. He had even taken the time to connect it with the maps of Arendelle she kept in the library.

It was remarkable. The detail was incredible. It was drawn in an elegant, artistic style, but not overly enough so as to be anything other than a practical map.

As Hiccup explained to her while she examined the finished map, he had taken the liberty of outlining the safest sailing routes through the Archipelago, taking into account weather, marauding viking tribes, treacherous waters, and even such things as sea serpents and dragon nesting sites, of which Elsa had no way of knowing about. Information that was invaluable for potential future expeditions.

It sounded too good to be true, and it was. As Hiccup told her, he had thought long and hard about her trade agreement, and come to a decision. As it was Elsa's own idea to offer Berk an advantageous position in trade, it would be stupid of him to deny such an opportunity for his people. He would keep Elsa's terms, at least most of them. In return, he would back Arendelle's version of the recent attack. Additionally, he would aid Elsa's future expeditions with instructions and even guides, to ensure a safe and successful journey. He would also share map information, meaning that Elsa would be supplied with copies of Berk's maps of all known areas, discounting their own territory. Those maps would substantially increase Arendelle's knowledge of the Northern realms, an area for

which accurate maps were almost impossible to find. The fact that Berk's cartographers had the advantage of being able to view the terrain safely and from above meant that theirs were quite probably the most accurate maps ever drafted of that notoriously treacherous region. Granted, she'd probably never need to venture that far, but it was better to have and not need, than need and not have.

They negotiated the terms of the agreement for a couple of hours. Halfway through, the Minister of Finance, as representative of the Merchant's Guild, joined them. Elsa took a backseat as she let her minister do what he did best, try to wrangle a better deal out of everything and everyone.

Nothing was finalised, but progress was being made. Slowly they were inching closer to an official accord.

No one was fooled. If this agreement were to actually go through, the two nations might as well declare an alliance.

After leaving her office, the only other time she saw Hiccup that day was when a shadow passed over her office window, no doubt the Chief and Toothless taking some flight time to relax.

Rather than relax, herself, Elsa was deep in discussion with the Commander General and some of his subordinates regarding the upping of internal security. Furthermore, there had been some troubling reports from the border. Nothing definite, yet, but Shad warned that they should not be ignored, so she authorized him to take personal command of the border garrisons and maximise their effectiveness as he saw fit. No one was to go in or out without his knowledge.

She spent what little time she had that evening being entertained by the Arendellian orchestra in the smaller ballroom, listening to several new pieces written in her honor. Half her Court was present, but she was not disturbed as she sat, enjoying the smooth music. A rather significant advantage over normal Court sessions, that was for sure. When it was finished, she expressed her genuine appreciation and congratulations.

Her pillow had never felt softer.

Her next day started off, to her pleasant surprise, normally. She went through her morning routine, had breakfast with her sister, Hiccup and Marina, and then strolled unhurriedly up to her office, enjoying the novel lack of emergencies so far that morning. The various things that had diverted her attention recently had no new developments, which gave her the time to backtrack and catch up with all the more mundane paperwork and requests that she'd been forced to put off, lately. Boring, certainly, but a pleasant change from the constant anxiety of the last few days.

Equally, she took the time to meet with representatives of the various private guilds and associations, and give a suitably strong and confident showing. After that, she started her rounds. She did see Hiccup from a distance, lounging on his favorite spot in the gardens with Toothless, but had no time for anything beyond a wave and a smile.

Before she knew it, lunch had come and left, as had Court. A normal day, by most standards, excluding some minor political squabbling

among the aristocracy. Then again, when had that not been the case?

When she had finally finished her duties for the evening, she went off in search of Anna, after a brief stop to her quarters to change into something a little bit warmer looking. Not because she was feeling particularly cold, she rarely did, but it was her experience that people were uncomfortable if they were bundled up in furs while she walked around wearing a single layer.

She decided that it'd be a better idea to send someone else to find Anna and send her to her. In the meantime, she headed to one of the balconies of her office floor. The view was amazing from this high up, and the torches had already been lit so there was plenty of light.

She enjoyed the silence and the view until her sister came, simply relaxing and letting the stiffness and haziness of a full day seep out. When Anna arrived, she sat on the marble bench next to her. The sisters shared a smile and twined their hands. For a handful of minutes they sat in contented silence, before they started to talk.

Apparently Anna had invited the others to join them, because not long after she heard voices approaching, and the ever so slight clinking of a metallic prosthetic against the floor. Sure enough, Hiccup and Kristoff joined them on the balcony, already deep in conversation.

They stopped when they reached the balcony, Kristoff giving a cheery hello before boldly sweeping a squealing Anna into his arms. Hiccup greeted her with a smile, and she did the same.

Hiccup and Kristoff were apparently not finished with their conversation, because they picked up again as soon as they seated themselves on the bench opposite theirs. Their heated argument was over â€œ ice?

Apparently Hiccup had taken an interest in Kristoff's line of work, which had, at some point, spawned a debate regarding different ice shapes' density and usability. Their conversation had peaked when they both disagreed on the best way to stack ice blocks of a particular shape, with Hiccup using his engineering knowledge to support his argument while Kristoff insisted that his experience with handling ice had showed him that Hiccup was wrong.

The argument was won when Kristoff asked Elsa to create some ice for a demonstration. Slightly baffled, she did so. Kristoff cackled while Hiccup looked on in dismay as he was proven wrong. He bounced back immediately, however, procuring his notebook from his tunic and proceeding to madly scribble notes while rapid-firing questions to both Kristoff and Elsa.

They let the two men to their discussion, and in turn focused on their own, pausing occasionally for Elsa to make some more ice blocks. 'For science', she was assured. The two men eventually absconded to the floor, where they sat crosslegged, stacking and restacking the different shaped blocks like a pair of squabbling children.

Elsa and Anna shared a look, and while Elsa was feeling a little too dignified to snicker, Anna had no such reservations. At some point, a servant came and offered everyone a hot beverage, and Elsa made a mental note to praise the young maid's forethought to the Lady Gertrude.

They chatted for what must have been the better part of an hour, before Anna decided that she and Kristoff had better things to do. She rose and grabbed his hand, interrupting him mid-speech and all but dragging him to his feet.

"We'll be going now. We have things to do. Goodnight!"

Kristoff, for his part, looked mighty confused. "Huh? What things?"

"You know, things." Anna insisted, giving him a sharp glare and all but dragging him away. He said a hasty goodbye before he was shoved through the doorway.

Elsa, knowing full well what Anna was doing, glared at her, only to receive a conspiratory wink in return, before Anna, too, vanished from the balcony.

She sighed, rubbing her eyes with her fingers. Her sister was incorrigible.

She eyed Hiccup, who was staring at the door the couple had vanished through with bemusement.

Still, perhaps she could take advantage of the opportunity Anna had so indelicately created.

When the viking finally turned to look at her, they shared a brief, embarrassed chuckle. She had no doubt that Hiccup had seen right through Anna's cunning plan.

She patted the spot next to her, recently vacated by her sister, and heard him slide until he was sitting right next to her.

"I'm sorry about her." She said, causing him to snicker.

"No need. You heard her, she had things to do. Apparently, we're not invited."

Elsa nodded sagely. "My sister's clubs are notoriously exclusive." They shared a laugh at Anna's transparency, before lapsing into not uncomfortable silence. Hiccup finished off his beverage before setting it aside. She turned to get a good look at him.

He was wearing the green tunic again, and he'd recently shaved, as his cheeks were smooth. His hair had grown considerably since he'd arrived. Having already been somewhat long when she met him, now they reached his shoulders and framed his face.

Oh dear, she must have lost focus for a bit. When snapped out of it she noticed Hiccup was looking at her strangely, no doubt having noticed her staring at him. She gave him a weak smile and felt heat rise to her cheeks. She covered her face with her cup, drinking the rest of it in one go and setting it aside.

"Anna seems to go out of her way to give us alone time." He said, to which she nodded.

"Indeed."

"Won't that be noticed? Isn't it a bit scandalous?"

She was not offended. No doubt he was aware of how rumors worked, and of the societal taboos regarding unmarried women, never mind actual members of the royal family. Still, she wasn't the Queen for nothing.

She shook her head. "No. The servants who work here are all loyal and sworn to secrecy. Even still, the people know me and trust me. I'm sure there is no fear of scandals."

There certainly was, but she would make sure that nothing came of it. If her hunch was right, Anna was doing her level best right now to minimize such dangers, after having so purposely left them alone. Still, she didn't want him to know that.

On Hiccup's disbelieving look, she added with a sigh: "I will take care of it", which seemed to be enough for him. He nodded, accepting her explanation with a nod and small smile. His breath fogged in front of him from the night's chill.

"Are you cold?" She had a strange relationship with the cold, one that she knew was unique to her. She could feel it, in a manner of speaking, but not quite as much as normal people and it never bothered her in any way. She often forgot that normal people got cold unless they mentioned it, and didn't want this to be such a case.

He shook his head, smiling, and brought his hands up to eye level. "Not bothered, I told you before."

Disbelieving, Elsa took hold of his hand to check. His skin was rough, no doubt the result of years of working with leather, metal and weapons. Still, the way his fingers curled around hers did send a pleasant feeling down her spine.

He was definitely not cold.

"You believe me now?" He said, rolling his eyes.

"It is kind of cold tonight." She defended herself.

"Not to me."

She felt his fingers absently rub her own, and smiled.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked.

"About what?"

"You know me!" He said, and Elsa spotted the first signs of awkwardness in his voice and the way he mechanically shrugged his shoulders. "About your sister leaving us here."

"What about her?"

"Why did she do it?"

What was he asking? He obviously knew that Anna wanted them to be alone. Was there another aspect to his question?

"She seems to be under the impression that if we're alone, interesting things happen." An understatement, perhaps. When Elsa was left alone with him, many things happened. Some of them good, some of them bad, all of them extraordinary.

"Why?"

"Well, she has eyes, for one. Secondly, I told her."

He looked at her, surprised. "You told her? About â€|" He trailed off, his cheeks reddening slightly. Was he embarrassed? It was just a kiss.

"About the kiss?"

He twitched slightly at the word. "I'm aware that I've been telling you to do something crazy for a while now, but that went above and beyond even my expectations."

Elsa chuckled. "I can think of little that would count as crazier than that. In any case, yes, I did tell her."

"Soâ€|" he said, taking a few seconds to think of his question. "What did you tell her, exactly?"

"That I liked you."

Was she being too bold? Perhaps. Still, Elsa was not afraid. She had a feeling that if she was going to make any headway with Hiccup, indirect half-measures weren't going to cut it.

Conceal, don't feel. The mantra of her childhood seemed to echo around her head in those few agonising seconds before he replied. Everything she had been taught, every bit of royal and emotional training recoiled from the recklessness of her confession. And yet here she was, her feelings bared, placed down in front of him like a challenge. Never had she felt so emotionally exposed. Only Anna had really managed to breach the walls that their well-meaning parents had helped build around her heart, only Anna had had the unrelenting bloody-minded persistence needed to truly get behind her defences. And yet this strange barbarian man had managed it, without even trying, without even noticing. It filled her with a strange, giddy kind of confidence.

'Conceal, don't feel' could go hang.

His mouth opened, but no sound came out. He closed it, then opened it again, more collected. "Is that why you, well, kissed me?"

"If you suggest what you did last time I will not hesitate to punch you." She said. She waved her clenched fist at him for emphasis.

His eyes widened for a second and he lost his shy smile, face darkening. For a single unconscious moment, he squeezed her hand

almost painfully, before he noticed and relaxed it again with an apologetic smile. He shook his head, as if to rid it of unwanted thoughts. What was that about?

"Would you, really?"

"Well, no." She admitted, sheepishly. "I'm not much of a punching person. I would not, however, think twice about turning you into an icicle."

He nodded solemnly. "I'm sure. Well, I learn from my mistakes. You won't hear that from me again."

"I'd better not."

"So â€œ is that why you did it? Because you like me?"

"Yes, Hiccup, don't be dense. I don't randomly go around kissing foreigners. It would rather complicate diplomatic relations."

"I knew _that_, I justâ€œ I just can't understand _why_."

She frowned. "Why what?"

"Of all the people you could â€œ like, why me? Why â€œ _this_?" And he made this frustrated gesture with his free hand, pointing to himself from head to feet.

She blinked at him. "You just pointed to all of you."

"Yes, exactly." He agreed. "Why me?"

Well, what could she really say to that? How did you go about explaining to a person why exactly you harbored romantic feelings towards them? Should she just start listing what she liked in him, like his characteristics and such? She didn't think Hiccup was fishing for compliments, so there must be something else he needed resolving and lacked the eloquence to word correctly.

Still, she wouldn't have pegged the mighty Viking Chief as being this insecure. What had brought this on?

"That's an unfair question." She said after a moment's reflection. "You're asking me to describe feelings I don't understand very well, myself."

He was silent for a few seconds. "I guess you're right. But, are you ever sure? You don't know me very well. We just met a while ago."

She smiled a little, let go of his hand and lent back on their stone bench to look up at the evening sky.

"Don't I?" She asked, almost addressing the stars as much as him. "Granted, I don't know a whole lot _about_ _you_, like your past or your friends. Neither of us have been all that forthcoming about our pasts. Still, I think I have a pretty good idea who you _are_, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third."

She could hear his audible gulp. His eyes flit this way and that,

reminding her almost of a cornered wildcat. She could tell, from the clenching of his jaw and the crease of his brow that he was thinking about something, hard. She gave him his time, realizing that this kind of thing couldn't be rushed. The wind ruffled his long, windswept hair and she found herself once again daydreaming about running her fingers through it. She hurriedly went back to examining the stars, incredibly glad that the darkness obscured her red stained face.

His inner debate seemed to have ended, or at least abated, when his frown disappeared and he let out a small chuckle.

"I guess I did act like a berk, that night."

She smiled teasingly. "I forgive you, just."

His eyes found hers again, and this time he was neither embarrassed nor frowning. A far more confident smile had found its way to his lips, one that she recognized much more easily than the unsure, insecure Hiccup from just minutes earlier.

"If nothing else, I feel I have to make it up to you for how I reacted, then."

Oh? That sounded ... promising.

"And how will you do that?"

His smirk was doing things to her she couldn't put to words. He'd moved so close that they were practically touching. Hazily, she wondered if he could hear her heart trying to beat its way out of her chest.

"With a much more appropriate reaction."

And then he leaned forward, and she leaned forward, and they were kissing. Her hands snaked their way up his chest to his shoulders while his curled around her waist and pulled her closer until she was flush against him. The bench was a bit uncomfortable, but that was the furthest from Elsa's mind as Hiccup kissed her.

Her hands moved, from his shoulders to his neck, fingers curling around long brown hair, tugging him ever closer. He leaned forward, pushing her back to rest against the bench as he turned his body so that he followed her movement down. Now with more space to move, his hand on her waist became a firm grip and the hand on her cheek moved to the nape of her neck.

It did not end quickly, unlike their previous kiss. He had not been taken by surprise, did not push her away, and reacted in more than just instinct. Hiccup, as it turned out, was a methodical, practiced kisser, and he intended to make her squirm. This was no peck, no half-shy half-intimidated moonlit kiss like her first, two years ago. Hiccup kissed her fiercely and without hesitation. She'd thought their first kiss had been pretty good. He improved on it.

Like all good things, this too came to an end as they separated. She gasped for air, her eyes opening. He was looking down at her, breathing hard, as well. His eyes were alight with an almost electric intensity that she was sure was matched in her own. It sent a shiver

down her spine, and made her want to practice kissing a bit longer. From the look in Hiccup's eyes, she doubted he'd object.

"That..." she said between breaths. "That was the first time!"

"Your first kiss?"

She shook her head. "First of its kind, certainly."

He smirked. She would've smothered his bulging ego if she wasn't too busy trying to get her scattered mind back into working order. Instead, she sat back up, closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his fingers as they smoothly brushed against her cheek. When they'd finished their pass, she took a deep breath and brought herself back under control.

"Does that mean?"

She did not want to complete the sentence, unsure of how to word it. He kissed her, this time. He initiated it. Surely that meant he shared her feelings, at least to some extent.

His expression clouded a little, part of his frown returned. As they had moved apart again, he took her hands, his thumbs absentmindedly rubbing small circles into her palms.

"I I do not deny that this felt amazing, or that I've wanted to do this for a while now." He admitted, color working its way up his neck and onto his face. It was all kinds of adorable.

"But?" She prompted, trying not to get too distracted.

He shook his head. "It is not so simple."

"How?"

"We are more than just Hiccup and Elsa. We have priorities, responsibilities and duties. They will always come first to me, as I suspect they will to you. Moreover, if I am to enter into this relationship with you, I want to know that it's for the right reasons."

She studied his face. "What is that supposed to mean?"

His face contorted for a second, in an emotion that passed too quickly for her to recognize.

"There are some personal reservations that make me doubt several things regarding myself and my motivations when it comes to you."

"More riddles." She said after a groan, shaking her head in frustration. "More half answers. More allusions to a past that you do not speak of. Be clear with me, Hiccup. Do you not like me in that way?"

She didn't believe that. He wouldn't have kissed her like that if he didn't like her. She wasn't wrong in this, she was sure.

"I didn't say that. What I'm saying is that I'm still figuring it out, myself."

She closed her eyes, and tried to gather her thoughts. What did she do now? She could insist, but what purpose would that serve? Ignoring the fact that she would probably fail, with how stubborn she knew Hiccup could be, did she really want to have to persuade him to work on this with her? A relationship between them would be dangerous, stressful, and full of pitfalls. If either wasn't fully willing, it would collapse immediately under the strain.

"So where does that leave us?"

"I â€“ I don't know. Why don't we just â€“ see what happens?"

She blinked. "See what happens?"

"Yeah. I don't have a solution ready, but I don't want to make a premature decision that I might regret."

"So you propose we just keep doing what we're doing and see what happens?"

"Well â€“ yes."

She nodded. "I can get behind that."

And then she kissed him again, her lips finding his swiftly, looking for that familiar feeling. He startled in surprise, but did not hesitate to kiss her back, even as he reached out a hand to the bench to steady them as she pressed against him.

Perhaps this was not what he had in mind when he proposed what he did, but this did fit her idea of 'keep doing what we're doing' rather well.

Besides, she wanted to practice kissing some more.

She broke it after a few seconds. His confused look was simply precious, and she chuckled as she gave him another peck. Then, she sat back with a catlike smile, still holding his hand in hers.

They stayed like that for a while, not speaking, simply enjoying the view and each other's presence. Not long after, she got up and said goodnight, promising to see him again tomorrow.

As she walked towards her quarters, she saw her sister waiting, leaning against the wall of a hallway. She said nothing as Elsa passed, but her flushed cheeks and wide, slightly goofy smile must have given her away because Anna immediately grinned like a lunatic and gave her a thumbs up. She said nothing, only shaking her head and continuing her way.

She managed to not obsess over every little thing that had happened with Hiccup, while she bathed. Instead, she took her time in the tub, relaxing. Closing her eyes in the hot water, she rested her head against the edge. She let out a drawn out sigh, as she felt the soreness of the day seep out of her tired body.

Her thoughts flew in a satisfied haze. The day had started well, and

ended even better. A part of her mind cautioned that nothing was truly solved. That Arendelle was still faced with a crisis, and that Hiccup, while he shared her feelings, was still a wildcard. As he had said, his priorities and first loyalty were with Berk. As hers were with Arendelle. She knew that.

The rest of her calmly informed that part that yes, she was aware, and it could shut up now.

When she woke up the next day, it took her a while to realize why she was feeling so elated. Memories of last night brought a wide smile to her face, one that persisted while she got washed and dressed.

Breakfast was awkward, but in a good way. Hiccup was there, but so was half her council, so she did her best to not give away the fluttery feeling she got whenever she glanced at him and he would do the same and he would half-smile before looking away. It was too much for Anna, who broke down into a fit of giggles ten minutes in, but Anna's unquenchable good cheer was nothing out of the ordinary and thankfully nobody seemed suspicious. Beyond that, she had the light discussion with her council members to distract her. Nobody spotted the new development in the relationship between their Queen and the Viking Chief. She hoped.

Afterwards, as soon as she arrived in her office, her head Courtier joined her, long black hair cascading elegantly down her back.

"You summoned me, my Queen?"

"Yes, Marina. I assume Anna got to you, yesterday?"

"The princess did. Do not worry, that part of the tower was discreetly emptied by myself and your sister. The balcony in question is not overlooked. The staff that served you were cautioned to discretion and reminded of their legally binding contracts."

"So no one knows?"

"Only the young chambermaid that brought your drinks and two other servants suspected anything, but they are trustworthy. As I said, they have been reminded of the benefits of discretion."

Elsa nodded. The servant contracts on the castle, drafted by her Head Courtier herself, were some of the best anyone could hope to find, provided they could adhere to its strict rules, which included keeping their mouths shut and severe punishment if they failed to do so. Marina subscribed to a carrot _and _stick philosophy.

That was good, that meant that her alone-time with a foreign leader would not become common knowledge. That was the last thing she needed.

"Good work, Marina."

Marina bowed her head in acknowledgement. Then, unusually for her, she seemed to hesitate for a moment. "If I may, my Queen?" She said.

Elsa saw the frown on Marina's face, and had to repress a groan. _Here

we go._

"What is it?"

"I have some concerns I need you to alleviate."

"Go on."

"With all due respect, my Queen, what happened with Chief Haddock last night on that balcony?" Marina said delicately, watching Elsa's face from behind lowered lids.

Elsa glared at her Head Courtier and tried her damndest not to blush.

"With all due respect, I don't see how that's any of your business."

"You must understand, my Queen, your situation is very delicate. The last thing you need right now are rumors about your virtue."

"The last thing I need right now is this conversation."

"I have talked to you before about political marriage and you've been against the idea, but this â€| this is disagreement on a whole other level of extreme."

Elsa's eyes narrowed. "I was not aware I needed your permission to have a private life."

Marina's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh my, that is not what I meant at all."

"But you insinuated that I should conduct whatever romantic life I have according to the council's wishes?"

"My only concern is the stability of the kingdom, your Majesty." Said Marina in a placating tone.

Elsa sucked in a deep, affronted breath. The she breathed it out again, slowly, letting go of her flushed anger at Marina's diplomatic scolding. She was not wrong to be concerned. As much as Elsa wished she could continue to explore this, this _thing _with Hiccup in complete privacy, it was simply not possible. Some people had to know, even to keep it contained for the short amount of time that could be reasonably expected before the rumours inevitably emerged. Had she been a prince or a king, a dalliance would have raised few eyebrows, even one with foreign royalty. However she was young, she was female and she was yet to find a husband, which made her hand and by extension her 'virtue,' a powerful diplomatic chip. Queen or not, this was probably not the only lecture she would have to endure from her advisors on this matter. Luckily, being an absolute ruler had its advantages.

"And you are good at your job, Marina. However, this is off limits, even to you. Understand?"

She bowed her head. "As you wish, your Majesty. I apologize if I was disrespectful."

"I expect you to follow my instructions to the letter, and to trust me to also have the kingdom as my first priority. Is that clear?"

"Of course, my Queen. I never doubted your dedication."

"I leave it up to you to see to it that any time I wish to reserve for Chief Hiccup is kept private and uninterrupted."

"As you command."

"Now go, and never speak of this to me again."

"Your Majesty." Marina said as she bowed, before leaving the room.

The rest of her time until lunch passed relatively normally. Meetings, paperwork, inspections, all routine.

Anna came to her, proposing that they take Hiccup to visit the Artists' Guild. Thinking it a fantastic idea, Elsa went along to see him, though at first he was reluctant to go. Apparently he wasn't confident enough in his sketches to present them to actual professionals, which Elsa thought was just nonsense. Between the two of them they finally persuaded him to come with them.

As they went, Naya Avarice, the dancer, joined them on Hiccup's request. Elsa had no reason not to accept her presence. She knew where she stood with him and was very satisfied with that.

Regardless, some inner part of her twisted whenever the two of them acted overly friendly, when he treated the dancer in an easy, casual manner that she knew he wouldn't use with her. Naya's attraction to him was no secret, though she wasn't sure if he was diplomatically ignoring it, or simply hadn't realized it yet. She wouldn't really be surprised if the latter was the case. For all his sharp eyes, mind and wit, he seemed rather dense with certain things.

Still, those dark thoughts were not enough to mar her evening. Once he got over his initial awkwardness, Hiccup really got into the discussion with the various painters, sculptors and engineers that formed the Artists' Guild. Rather, the Ellesmyre sisters found themselves bored after three hours of simply watching them go at it. Still, Hiccup seemed happy, and that made Elsa herself smile.

In the end, Hiccup left carrying several new sketches, some his, some not. They ranged from portraits to blueprints, and he seemed immensely satisfied with them. Naya left with a charcoal sketch of herself in a graceful dancing pose, and seemed quite intent on making sure Hiccup knew how grateful she was. For one immature moment, Elsa dearly wished for rocks to suddenly appear and drop on the young woman's perfect little head.

She shook her head, chasing the crazy thought away. Where had that come from?

After the visit to the Guild everyone went to their quarters to bathe and change, before reconvening to dine. It was a semi-formal affair, less grand than the ball of a few days ago but still suitably grandiose. A smaller room was used, and less people were invited, though all were important.

She made extra certain that she only had half a cup, despite Anna's teasing. Moreover, though she was once again officially escorted by Hiccup, she made it a point to dance with a lot of people and mingle. Hiccup was usually at her side, but not always, and that was fine. It should help avoid the formation of rumors.

Still, she had a fun time, as she expected to. They danced and they talked, and it was suitably entertaining.

Her favorite part of the evening came just after the gathering's ending. They left, heading casually towards the upper floors where the guest quarters and Elsa's own rooms were. When suitably alone, the two of them snuck off to one of the dozens of balconies lining the walkways while Ernie served as a lookout from the corridor. Those fifteen minutes of thoroughly enjoyable kissing left her breathless and slightly ruffled. It was just as good that all her servants had been dismissed and no one saw her messy hair, crumpled dress and slightly swollen lips. Whatever Marina thought of the situation, she was doing her job well.

~E~

She was woken in the middle of the night, her eyes snapping open as she surged to a sitting position, looking around in alarm and confusion. When she managed to focus, she recognized the sound that woke her as being rather insistent knocking on her door.

She rose as quickly as she could manage, throwing a robe over her nightclothes and trying in vain to tame her hair with one hand while she made her way to the door.

The knocking still had not stopped.

"Yes?" She asked, containing her irritation at being woken. If they saw fit to rouse her, it must be important.

"Apologies for waking you, your Majesty," came the nervous voice of one of her handmaidens "but something has occurred. The Commander General requested your presence. He insisted that urgency is paramount."

What now?

"Where?"

"East holding cells."

"I'll be there."

"Should I assist, my Queen?"

"I can dress myself, Merope. Go back to bed."

"Yes, your Majesty."

She hurriedly splashed some water on her face and pulled out a purple dress simple enough for her to put on herself. She ran her hands through her hair a few times but had no time to braid it. Instead, she left it to fall down her back as she hurried back towards the

door.

When she marched out of her quarters, a pair of guards fell into step behind her.

She arrived at the headquarters of the east wing of the castle's main garrison without fanfare. Despite the late hour the place was teeming with activity, some of her country's top brass bowed and made way for her as she hurried through the corridors.

When she entered the holding facility, the first thing she saw was Shad, his expression was grim and his uniform uncharacteristically crumpled. He looked very tired, and she doubted he'd seen any sleep in a while.

"What is going on?" She demanded.

"My Queen, there have been developments during the night."

"Tell me."

"As per your orders, border security has been tightened recently. Last night, we were able to detect a breach. Our scouts reported a likely team of five infiltrators."

Border breaches were unfortunate, but not particularly rare. However vigilant Shad's patrols were, Elsa knew that a small group with enough resources could slip into Arendelle with ease. The borders of her kingdom were too long, and too wild, to secure or police in their entirety. She had only hoped for some advanced warning of their arrival in her kingdom.

"Yes, I read the report, they slipped through the Sharadan Pass yesterday morning. What of it?"

"We managed to track and capture one of them."

Elsa's eyes widened. That was important news.

"Excellent. What has he been saying?"

Here, Shad shook his head.

"A lot of things, and nothing at the same time. He seems very unstable, though I suppose he could be putting an act."

"Is there a particular reason this could not wait until morning?"

"What he's been saying has been worrying. I thought it prudent for you to hear it yourself, sooner rather than later."

"Have you interrogated him?"

"We started almost as soon as we got him to the capital, but he has said nothing of consequence as of yet."

"Take me to him."

She followed the General who lead her deeper into the bowels of the

castle. She rarely came down here, as she never particularly liked the lower dungeons. Dark and damp, they had been a necessity when the castle was first built by her ancestors, during one of the the more tumultuous times in Arendelle's past. The heavy stone vaulting barely cleared Elsa's head as they traveled further down, transitioning into solid rock as they went deeper than the foundations of the castle. The passageway was narrow and uncomfortably humid and the hard granite walls seeming to push in from all sides. Elsa frowned, they had to be worried if they were holding him down here.

The room she ended up in was small and windowless, hollowed out of the solid cliff-rock on which the castle rested. Smack dab in the center lay a small wooden platform. There, on it, lay a man, tightly held by iron manacles in all of his limbs. Around the room, three wardens were watching the prisoner warily or cleaning their tools.

"You're back, aren't you, my favorite general?" The captive man spoke. His sarcastic voice was hoarse and broke often. The man himself was filthy, his clothes were torn and he was straining against his bonds as hard as he could, contorting his body grotesquely in a vain attempt to break free.

"I was beginning to think that you'd left me all alone." The man continued, not perturbed by Shad's quiet. When Elsa finally entered his field of vision, his crazed eyes snapped to her, his head ceasing its constant movement even as his hands and legs continued to strain.

"What's this? You brought me the Snow Queen herself? Come here, Queensie, I'll show you exactly what a girl the likes of you should be used for."

This was too much for one of the wardens, who grabbed hold of the man's jaw and squeezed, drawing the man's gaze to him.

"Respect the Queen, worm, or it'll be your tongue."

When the warden wrenched his hand away, the man let out a series of barking laughs.

"Then how will I talk if I've got no tongue, eh?"

"There are ways." Was the soldier's reply. The man laughed once again before suddenly scowling.

"Fine, whatever." The man twisted around to look at her, and, after rolling his eyes, adopted a tone of exaggerated servility "Oh ye blessed Queen, thank ye fer bestowing the honor of yer presence upon me. That better?" He wasn't fooling anyone, and if his mocking tone was any indication, he hadn't meant to.

"Who are you?" Elsa asked, making herself heard for the first time. The man's eyes snapped back to her.

"Wouldn't ye like to know, lass? I'm not gonna just tell ye." He bared his teeth at her in a mocking parody of a smile.

Elsa turned to look at Shad.

"They all talk, eventually." He told her, low enough that the prisoner probably hadn't heard. She returned her gaze to the deranged captive.

"What is your purpose? Why did you infiltrate Arendelle?"

He barked a laugh once again. "Untie me, and I'll show you why. It would be easy. Painless even. Just me hands around yer little neck. I promise it wouldn't hurt but a bit. I'll do it all gentle-like."

This man unnerved her, but she'd be damned before she let any of it show on her face.

"Why are you so bent on killing me?" She said levelly, her eyes never leaving his face.

He completely ignored her question, instead launching on his own tirade.

"You think you're so safe, surrounded by your thralls and hidden behind your walls. Well, yer not, let me tell you. We are everywhere. We see everything. Your castle will fall, your magic will not avail you, and your dragon tamer will not protect you."

Elsa frowned. Was that a reference to Hiccup?

"Who?"

The man laughed, a manic, hysterical sound that reverberated on the stone walls of the chamber. "You think we don't know? A masterful move, I'll give ye that, to bring the king of them dragon riders to protect you. But he won't help ye, not with Ioch. Soon, the dragon will be dealt with, and you'll be next."

Elsa said nothing in reply, but the man appeared to not need any encouragement. His eyes were darting around, his head lolling this way and that as his muscles strained against the iron bounds.

"You couldn't catch my men, either could you, witch?" He said, before his voice took a mocking sing-song quality "And all the Queen's horses and all the Queen's men won't be able to put the poor Queensie back together again." His eyes focused on her, suddenly filled with an burning malevolence. He snarled, "Not when he's through with you, girl."

Elsa had heard enough of the man's crazed ramblings. She turned and approached her General, who looked at her grimly.

"Unnerving, isn't it?" he asked her, to which she could only nod "I wanted you to see this, to hear him by yourself. The threat is real, and perhaps moreso than even I feared."

She nodded again. "Do what you need to do."

As she moved to exit the chamber, the prisoner's yell stopped her.

"Hey, queensie!" Her sudden stop, just at the door, must have been all the encouragement he needed to continue. When he spoke, his words

were intermixed with barely controlled chuckles.

"You think your enemies fear your magic? Well, I don't. Heh. I used to, but now I don't, see? Oh, and did you know? Some say the world will end in fire. And you know what? I believe 'em!"

The man's manic laughter was the last thing Elsa heard as she left the dungeon, the unnerving sound echoing eerily against the stone walls. She headed back to her quarters, already thinking things through in her head. Try as she might, one thing kept returning to the forefront of her thoughts.

... some say the world will end in fire ...

Well, that wasn't ominous at all.

~E~

When Elsa sprang awake the next morning, all she could remember of her dreams was the red glow and the bristling heat of fire. Details evaded her, but fire had been present in her dreams a lot in the last few days since her encounter with Hiccup.

>
'... some say the world will end in fire â€| '_

She shook her head clear of those words as she had her morning shower, resolving not to let last night ruin her day.

Her morning was, as usual, busy. The work of a ruler never ran out. Perhaps the most important part of it was when she talked to General Mertok, who came to her for his report, something that he'd insisted on doing personally.

Their topics of discussion were, unfortunately, all very worrying.

"No progress since last night, I fear." He said when the matter of the prisoner came up.

"What do we know of him?"

"Little to nothing. He carried no identification. His equipment was well made but appearance would suggest Grandland, but it is not definite."

"Is he really unhinged, or just faking it?"

"We cannot be sure. It has been used by prisoners before, but it's too early to tell."

"Well, keep me informed. And make sure that he does not share the last prisoner's fate. I place you solely responsible for his condition."

"As you wish, your Majesty."

"There is also the matter of â€| these." Elsa said, as she waved at the papers currently in front of her. Shad picked them up and looked them over.

"Everything seems to be in order."

"Is it, really? Do we really need so many war machines? I know I signed for their installations across the city, but don't you think their numbers are a bit much?"

"A show of force must never be done halfway."

"Are they practical, at least? Or are they just for show?"

The edge in the General's voice showed the indignation that his face didn't. "Of course they are practical, my Queen. They are the best our engineers could come up with to combat a dragon's mobility."

"I see. Out of curiosity, what are the simulations like?"

"Assuming that the Chief is holding back by fifty percent every time he flies with the dragon and performs stunts, and taking into account the reports on your own battle with him, we can safely say that the castle is perfectly defensible, with the kill zone loosening the further one goes from the center of the city."

"And if there is more than one dragon?"

He paused for a few seconds. "The calculations are progressively bleaker the more dragons are accounted for."

"I see. Still, we can't add a ballista atop each roof to account for a possibility that is not going to happen. For example, look at this." She said as she offered another small stack of papers at the General. "These orders are going to put heavy strain on our budget. Do we really need so many?"

"It is not enough to simply shield the capital, my Queen. I hope to have all border forts and major cities outfitted by the end of the year."

"And you believe it is worth it?"

He nodded. "Doubtlessly. The prisoner's warnings of fire only add to the threat of dragon attacks. As the saying goes, speak softly, but carry a big stick. Even if tensions with Berk end up amounting to nothing, other countries will have taken note of the dragons' devastating potential in war, and now they know they can be tamed. I have a feeling that developing defensive directives for aerial warfare is not only prudent but may be necessary for this country's, any country's, long term survival." He said grimly, looking over the table at her.

"Moreover, even if my fears turn out to be groundless, the machines work very well as defenses against conventional infantry and cavalry attacks. Such fortifications were long overdue, if you would ask me. Why, I had proposed something similar to your late father, years ago, but was shot down. I believe the time is now right."

She let out a sigh as she rubbed her temples. She had been considering Shad's proposals for most of the morning. What it had boiled down to in her head was this: On one hand, this all seemed to be a huge overreaction, not to mention a huge expense that could put to better use elsewhere. Things like welfare, infrastructure, trade, exploration. Hell, anything that wasn't big, ugly war machines.

On the other hand, the threat of Grandlandian offensives, the rising number of border breeches and yes, even the slight possibility of dragon raids should be enough to add artillery defenses to her forts and cities. Hadn't she just the other day been thinking about how it was better to have and not need than need and not have?

She loathed the very idea of the whole deal. She hated giving over such a big amount of state budget to what was basically the Arendellian war-machine. Arendelle wasn't a warring country. It's army wasn't big or great, and until very recently it had no obvious enemies. She wanted to do good things for her people, to raise their living standard as much as she could, and to bring prosperity and happiness to every single one of her subjects.

But what if Shad was right? Would she be later known as the weak link in the Ellesmyre dynasty? As the one who brought destruction upon Arendelle with her indecision and fear of war? Would people lament her father's untimely death and curse her own ascension to power because she was weak?

"And the facilities will be enough to produce the number of machines you have estimated?"

"They should be, yes. Finished machines will be stored there while they await transportation to their destinations."

"You have approval, then, General."

She accepted back the papers from him. They would get inspected one last time, then signed and then stamped, before being given to someone for processing and delivery.

"A wise decision, my Queen."

Her thoughts were dark, but her decision had been made.

"Just don't make me regret this, General."

"Of course not, your Majesty."

The meeting left a bad taste in her mouth for the rest of the morning until lunch, on which she took a much needed break to unwind. Thankfully, the next matter that required her attention had the good sense to wait until after she'd eaten. It came in the form of a watchman, who informed her that something had been spotted on the horizon. Something flying.

Assuming that to be Hiccup's officer, Elsa activated a set of orders that she'd prepared in advance. Basically, to stop the city guard from any offensive action, especially from Shad's trigger-happy engineers. As well, some aristocrats would be notified so as to be present, as per their wish. Dragons would always interest people, she ventured a guess.

Then, she sent for the Chief, requesting him to meet her at the Courtyard, where the dragon rider would be received. The speck that was the dragon could not be seen by the naked eye yet, at least not her eyes, but maybe the glare of the sun was to be blamed for that. Regardless, they had a few minutes before she arrived.

She was dressed in one of her more impressive and regal gowns by her handmaidens, a purple one that she particularly liked, and had her hair rebraided to perfection. Satisfied, she walked to the Courtyard, followed by most of her inner council and several courtiers. Halfway there, she was joined by Anna, who smiled at her and fell into step next to her.

The Courtyard was half-full already, packed with everyone cleared to be in the castle grounds that wasn't currently busy with something or other. Everyone was orderly stacked at the edges, leaving most of the area in the center empty. The Chief was already there, dressed in a light brown tunic, and at his side the dragon Toothless was restlessly redistributing his weight in what Elsa assumed was anxiety to see another dragon after several months of solitude.

Slowly, murmurs broke among the crowd when a shape became visible, in the distance. the speck slowly grew bigger and bigger as it approached.

Hiccup, who was standing next to her, leaner close and murmured, low enough that only she could hear.

"Just a heads-up, when she arrives, do not ask about the dragon. Try not to stare too much, either."

His voice was unusually grim, which was enough for her to direct a curious look his way.

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see."

She returned her gaze to the ever growing speck on the horizon. Soon, the shape grew bigger and more distinguished, until she could make out a body and wings, steadily beating as the dragon flew closer.

A roar was heard, not particularly aggressive but still fearsome. Toothless immediately perked, rising to his full height and extending his wings. His maw opened and he let out a roar of his own, as if calling the other dragon to him. The people of Arendelle watched the exchange in fascination.

The dragon's trajectory veered slightly, and now came directly towards the Courtyard. As it approached, Elsa finally noticed some things about it. It was a light green colour, mottled impressively with dark red and green scales that gave it an iridescent quality, like a fish or an insect. It was quite a bit bigger than Toothless himself.

The dragon circled ever lower above the Courtyard, until it finally landed with a great thud, it's muscular limbs absorbing the high speed fall with ease. Elsa could see a rider on it, seated right behind its bulbous head. Its harness was reminiscent of Toothless' own.

Flitting around it, looking impossibly small in comparison, was the tiny dragon Elsa had seen in Hiccup's quarters. Frog? Frod? Something like that.

Upon closer inspection, this dragon was far more different to Toothless in shape and size than she would have expected. Its body was wider and its wings much smaller than Toothless's more compact frame. Unlike Toothless's sail like spines, this dragon's were longer, rounded and blood red, running down a considerably longer neck, and continuing down both lengths of its forked tail. Its head was quite large, with wide yellow eyes and a sharp protruding horn. Its teeth were aggressively jutting out of its jaw.

Elsa saw the rider dismount with a light hop and head for Hiccup.

Before she could focus on the rider, however, she noticed something weird about the dragon's physiology. Its neck was positioned on the right side of its body, strangely off center. There was an empty space to the left of the neck, which protruded slightly. It was bound in many layers of tightly set leather, not unlike one would dress a wound, though the dragon had shown no impairment in his movement. Upon closer inspection, there were many puckered scars littering the dragon's green hide, most of them silvery and old.

What had happened to this dragon?

A woman's voice, foreign and rough, brought her out of her musings.

"My Chief."

"It's good to have you here. Welcome."

Elsa cursed her inattentiveness, she'd missed the initial greeting. She turned her head and discreetly examined the new arrival. With some satisfaction, Elsa noted that she, too, was almost a full head shorter than Hiccup.

Covered mostly in fur clothing and leather, her outfit was very similar to what she'd often seen Hiccup wear. Strapped on her back were a sizable wooden shield and a fearsome battle-axe, as well as a horned helmet. The woman's dirty blonde hair were hanging freely down her shoulders, and Elsa had to admit that she was quite beautiful, in a rough sort of way.

Well, if not for the rather dismissive way she was looking around.

When the newcomer's eyes landed on her, she raised an eyebrow and shamelessly run her eyes up and down Elsa's form. Then, she leaned closer to Hiccup and whispered, though Elsa could quite clearly hear her, as the woman apparently failed at whispering.

"Who's sparkly over here?"

Elsa swallowed her indignation, without a single twitch betraying her annoyance at this viking's ill manners. But honestly?_Sparkly_? She stole a look down at her gown. Granted, she had sprinkled it with ice crystals as she was fond of doing to her dresses, but that was no reason to say it in such a demeaning way.

Hiccup coughed awkwardly and shot a glance at Elsa's carefully controlled expression, aware that the woman's whisper had been

anything but.

"May I present to you Elsa Ellesmyre, Queen of the country of Arendelle?"

The woman scratched the back of head, either unaware of her blunder or unwilling to apologize. She looked at Elsa again, and bowed.

"Regards, your Majesty."

Well, perhaps she knew some manners.

"Welcome to Arendelle." She said in a practised, diplomatic tone. "Any friend or compatriot of Chief Haddock's are welcome here. As my guest, I hope your stay will be a pleasant one. If there is anything you require, please don't hesitate to ask any of the staff or me directly."

The woman gave her another bow, this time more curt.

"Should we move inside?" Elsa asked, but it was more a statement than a suggestion, and everyone turned around and walked with her, back towards the castle.

"Toothless will keep him company." Hiccup said to the blonde Viking when she threw a nervous glance back at her dragon.

The people began to disperse, the spectacle now over, though many stayed and watched this new and different dragon in fascination.

When inside, Elsa regarded her entourage and politely dismissed them, citing that the journey must have been long and the new arrival would like to get rested and fed. Madame Gertrude stayed behind, but the rest bowed, said their welcomes and their greetings, before departing.

Then it was just the two Vikings, Elsa, Anna and Madame Gertrude walking in the hallway.

Hiccup kept throwing amused look at his compatriot who was moving in a very wooden way and kept her gaze firmly in front of her.

"You know, you can relax now. Queen Elsa and the Princess Anna are friends."

Elsa shared a look and a smile with her sister.

The blonde viking's head snapped towards Hiccup, eyes widening.

"You mean it?"

"Sure."

Then, her expression turned into a furious glare, and she moved.

Before Elsa had time to blink, never mind think, the woman's fist had been buried in Hiccup's gut. The Chief doubled over, coughing in

surprise and pain as he fell to his knees from the strike.

"_That_is for leaving. Again." The woman spat. Hiccup tried to speak but no sound came out of his mouth. He looked up, eyes half-closed in pain, just in time to catch the woman's fist with his cheek.

Hiccup sprawled on the ground from the punch as the woman withdrew her extended hand, knuckles white from clenching.

"And _that_is for not writing at all and letting us worry." She growled as she shook life back into her fingers.

Hiccup groaned from his current position on the ground, still holding his solar plexus.

Elsa didn't know what to do. Should she freeze the woman? But she made no further aggressive movements, and she seemed to be very close to Hiccup. What had just happened?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Hiccup's soft chuckling, from the floor.

"You â€| never change." he wheezed, still chuckling.

The Viking woman herself barked out a laugh, before extending a hand at her chief. Hiccup grabbed hold and she pulled, helping him to his feet with surprising strength. Hiccup bent over for a minuite, recovering, but seemed to be none the worse for wear. Though his cheek was red, he was smiling widely.

"That's not quite right, though." He said, rubbing his jaw. The woman's grin matched his own.

"I can't give you the old one-two in its entirety, so this'll have to do."

Then they hugged each other, still laughing.

Elsa looked at Anna, her face set in an expression of bewilderment. Anna matched her confusion, shrugging her shoulders in uncertainlty._Vikings were weird._

"It's good to see you, Ruff." She heard Hiccup say, before turning back to them.

"Oh, that's right." He said as he and the woman broke the hug. "I didn't introduce you, did I?"

"Nope."

"Queen Elsa, Princess Anna, this is Ruffnut Thorston, one of my most trusted friends."

"And Berk's number one dragon rider!" Ruffnut exclaimed, flashing a smirk.

Now this, Elsa doubted very much. Her amused expression was matched by Anna, and Hiccup outright snorted.

Ruffnut glared at her Chief.

"You and your _broken_Night Fury don't count."

Hiccup's amused look didn't abate. The woman pouted, grumbling.

"Bastard, always ruining my fun. Can't even let me impress the foreigners."

Hiccup's chuckling turned into awkward coughing at that.

"O-okay! Let's go get you situated, yeah?"

"Right. Oh! Before I forget!" Ruffnut said as she fished around her coat for something. "Catch." She threw something at Hiccup, who caught it instinctively. Elsa looked at it curiously. It was some sort of metallic contraption, no bigger than a sword handle.

"Your fire-breather?"

She nodded. "It's broken. Fix it for me, pretty please?"

He groaned. "Again? What about your spare?"

"Heh. Funny story, actually â€¡"

"This _is_your spare, isn't it?"

"... maybe?"

"You're impossible, Ruff. You need to be careful with this stuff."

"While you're at it, can you fix the other one, too?"

Hiccup shook his head as he let out a sigh. "Fine. Hand it over."

"It's with my things. I'll give it to you later."

Hiccup nodded, then turned his gaze back to the Ellesmyre sisters. Having the Vikings' attention, Elsa spoke up.

"Madame Gertrude will find appropriate lodgings for miss Thorston. I assume you would prefer your room be close to the Chief's own?"

She nodded, and Gertrude bowed her head in understanding. Knowing her, she'd place the woman a couple hallways further than the Chief. Close enough to be practical, but far enough to avoid rumors. Living arrangements when the castle wasn't at full capacity could get needlessly complicated.

Gertrude bowed and motioned for them to follow, which the Vikings did. Elsa and Anna watched them as they left, deep in conversation, taking in the sight of the two catching up.

There was a banquet thrown that night, in honor of some aristocrat who had done something Elsa had no desire to care about. Still, Hiccup and the Thorston woman had been invited, which meant that a lot more people came than usual, in order to see this new

viking.

Though Thorston was beautiful, she abstained from the elaborate dresses, complicated hairdos, or the fine jewelry of the female Arendellian aristocracy, making her seem equal parts plain and interesting by comparison as she sat next to Hiccup in her simple, brown dress, hair caught in two pigtails behind her. Elsa could see a few of the more adventurous young lords hovering close by, though Hiccup's presence and lightning-quick glares deterred them from approaching.

Not that she appeared to care. At all. Ruffnut Thorston seemed to have only two things in mind that evening. Hiccup, and the food. When she wasn't talking animatedly with her Chief, Thorston was doing her best to eat, well, everything. She seemed to at least know how not to make a mess, though Elsa noted Hiccup cautioning her several times to slow down and not cause a scene.

After the banquet was officially finished, Elsa invited the two vikings, her council, Anna and Kristoff, and few, very select people to a short of smaller after-party in a different area. Drinks were abundant as people socialised and relaxed. Depending on how one looked at it, this party could be more relaxing or much more dangerous.

Elsa spent most of her time with Anna and Kristoff as the council and her other guests mingled. She did not begrudge Hiccup for basically ignoring her. She understood that he hadn't seen his friend in months, and moreover hadn't seen any of his people for the same duration. She felt it would be unfair to want to still be the focus of his attention, in those circumstances. Still, that didn't stop her from feeling better whenever he glanced her way and gave her a warm smile.

It was certainly strange, watching them. Vikings were much more \textasciitilde physical. Vividly moving their hands as they talked, pushing and even punching each other when they joked. It was a new side of Hiccup that Elsa finally got to see. Less of the politician, more of the Viking. The casual way with which they touched each other's hands and shoulders and basically ignored etiquette regarding distance between people made her wonder if that was something all Vikings did, or if it was a sign of further intimacy. She doubted it, but she couldn't help but wonder.

Similarly, as she watched Thorston, any lingering doubt she might have had over Hiccup's status evaporated. She seemed much more casual with him than their ranks would suggest, but she listened to him attentively and always gave him her full attention. When Hiccup asked for something, she immediately complied.

They were friends, no doubt, but both seemed well aware of their difference in positions.

Thorston seemed like as much of a drinker as she was an eater, and Hiccup matched her cup for cup as the night wore on. Elsa wanted to go talk to Hiccup, and maybe even the Thorston woman, but their closeness and continued conversation, not to mention alcohol tolerance, intimidated her. She didn't want to interrupt them without a reason and make things awkward. She didn't know Berk, the topic of their discussion, so she contented herself with listening. She didn't

understand much of what was told, but the things she did were illuminating in many ways. Names, places, situations. Berk was suddenly less of an abstract concept in her mind and began to actually take shape. Apparently, he wasn't joking when he'd mentioned the names Fishlegs and Snotlout.

They all separated after, going to their respective chambers. Elsa had already been warned by Hiccup to avoid sending any handmaidens to Thorston, so she relayed the order to Gertrude, before heading to her quarters to bathe and go to sleep.

The next day began routinely, with her having to deal with the usual paperwork, audiences and headaches. Reports came from the borders, speaking of tensions and of a couple of breeches, but nothing overly worrying or anything to react to. Shad's report on the prisoner reported failure, but he was confident in their eventual success. Disclosed was the report on the siege machines' facility, and its progress. A financial nightmare, but one she had approved, so now she had to see it through.

As she had began her rounds over the castle, she ran into the two resident Vikings and Ernie. She first noted their armor, as characteristic as it was light, before noticing the weapons they were carrying.

"Good day." She greeted, drawing their attention. Hiccup smiled at her, and she smiled back instinctively.

"And to you, Queen Elsa."

"Your Majesty." Came the greeting from Ernie and Thorston.

"We were just on our way to the barracks, as it happened."

"Mind if I tag along?" She had to see this, whatever it was. It was bound to be interesting.

"It would be our pleasure."

Thorston muttered something, too low for Elsa to hear. Hiccup, who heard, her, winced for a second before glaring at the blonde viking. She shamelessly winked at him before guffawing at his slightly reddened face.

What had Elsa missed?

"Let's just go." He muttered.

Soon they arrived at the barracks, where Hiccup was joined by his new friends. Elsa recognized them as being part of that silly little archery competition, some days ago, but did not know their names.

Hiccup introduced Ruffnut to his circle of friends after the round of greetings was over, but the female viking seemed to not be paying much attention. She was looking around the training yard, eyeing each and every person there with a critical eye.

"Ruff?" Hiccup asked, waving a hand in front of her eyes. She didn't look away, but she raised her hand to point at a man swinging his

sword in practised motions against a dummy. He was tall, heavily muscled, and currently lacking in plate-armor.

"I want that one." She declared, a smile playing on her lips. Elsa blinked in confusion. That â€œ| in no way answered the question Hiccup had posed.

Hiccup stopped whatever he was about to say, and instead followed Thorston's line of sight to the man. He let out a sigh.

"Fine. Excuse me." The latter was directed to Ted, who he walked around as he moved away from the group. Elsa followed him with her eyes. He walked up to the practising man and drew his attention, quickly waving away the man's bow. Elsa couldn't hear what he said to him, but it was fun to watch her soldier's expression through it all. First serious, as appropriate in the presence of a direct superior or important official, then interest, followed by confusion. Hiccup pointed, and the guard looked at where he was pointing and saw Thorston, waving cheerily at him.

He looked uncomfortable for a few moment, and replied to Hiccup's request. Whatever it was, Hiccup waved it off and talked some more. Eventually, the guard nodded, and the viking clapped him on the shoulder in good cheer. Despite the fact that Hiccup was slightly taller than him, the guard was at least twice Hiccup's mass.

The two of them moved towards a dueling area, one of many around, and Thorston excused herself from the group as she moved towards them. As she did, she drew her axe in one, swift movement from her back, its edge glinting against the sun. The handle had something wrapped around it, but Elsa couldn't make out what it was. As she walked, she dropped her metal helmet and the heavy, wooden shield, gripping her heavy axe in both hands.

Hiccup assumed a serious expression and told Thorston something Elsa couldn't hear, but the female viking only pushed her chief out of the dueling range. After a nod to her opponent, she charged.

The first mistake happened in that instant. The man, perhaps having underestimated her or hesitating to take up arms against a woman, was too slow to raise his guard. Thorston's axe broke through the man's hasty block and pushed the sword away, before using the wooden handle to jab him on the chest, pushing him stumbling back. She then dropped low and swept him off his feet with a kick, before rising and placing her axe's edge on his throat.

Elsa was left rather impressed. So fast. One mistake from the guard was all it had taken for him to be out of the fight.

"One more?" Thorston said, loud enough to carry over to their spectators. The man smiled, and accepted the offered hand of assistance.

They took their starting positions again, and began. This time, the man was ready, and he managed to hold off her heavy axe with his sword. As they exchanged scouting blows, it became obvious that he was stronger, but she was faster.

Furthermore, she didn't seem to get the concept of fair play.

The second bout ended anticlimactically, with a simple kick in the shins. Having not expected it, it was enough for the man, who Hiccup had informed her was called Brian, to lose his focus and consequently his weapon.

Brian lasted two more bouts, all of which he lost, before he expressed his appreciation for the match and bowed out.

Rather than be deterred, Thorston simply scoured the range again, and pointed to another man.

"That one."

Hiccup obliged her, walking over to another man practicing with a halberd. Elsa was rather amused as he repeated the same thing, slowly convincing the man to spar with the female viking. No doubt her men would be intimidated by the chief or hesitant to fight a woman, and no doubt Hiccup was disabusing them of these notions.

The second one went similarly to the first, only he took three rounds before bowing out, seeing as Thorston had ended the fight by splitting his halberd in two with her axe.

This continued for the next hour, as the woman picked out her targets and fought them, her speed and deviousness, coupled with some hesitation from her partners, being enough to give her victory. By now, she had a pretty wide audience, and after the first few fights her targets no longer needed convincing from Hiccup, eager to test themselves against this strange viking warrior.

During a break in which she rejoined their group, Thorston gave Elsa a rather scrutinizing gaze before addressing her.

"Do you fight, your Majesty?"

It wasn't the question in itself that annoyed her. Thorston didn't know her, so it was not weird for her to wonder at her combat skills.

It was the look in her eye. The way she looked Elsa up and down, at her 'sparkly' dress and elaborate braid, before asking with a slightly raised eyebrow and a half-mocking smile. Thorston had already judged Elsa's worth, found her lacking, and now merely sought confirmation.

Well, she couldn't have that.

She smiled thinly as she clenched her fist. Ice crackled as it formed around it, snaking up her arm, the atmosphere noticeably chilling. The weapon that the woman was gripping so expertly frosted over, making her startle and stare at her axe in shock.

"Not with weapons."

She looked surprised, her eyes going wide upon witnessing Elsa's power for the first time. Elsa suppressed a smug smile. Her point made, she dispersed the frost.

Perhaps this would teach the viking to not jump to conclusions.

Hiccup put a hand on Thorston's shoulder, and shot her an amused look.

"Trust me, you do not want to go there." Elsa smiled at the knowing wink he sent her way.

Breaking off from the rest of the group, one of Hiccup's friends approached the vikings. He was just a little bit taller than Elsa herself, black haired and with a strong jaw. As he approached them, he carefully drew his longsword.

"Perhaps, since her Majesty is otherwise occupied, I could suffice as your opponent?"

Thorston looked at him critically, a calculating gleam in her eye.

"And you are?"

Hiccup palmed his face and muttered to himself, no doubt embarrassed in Thorston's stead, as he had already introduced everyone to her.

"Gregor Thrandal, at your service."

She nodded.

"You'll do."

Gregor did not hesitate, nor did he underestimate her. His sword was there to block her axe, he covered his weak spots and he did not fall for her tricks.

Three furious minutes later, Thorston was lying on her back and panting heavily, her axe meters away on the ground while an equally tired Gregor held his blade at her throat.

Thorston looked up at him and she smiled. Elsa was a little unnerved, truth be told.

"Again."

~E~

The first week after that passed in a blur. Elsa was as busy as always, if not moreso, now that tensions were high. The situation at the borders seemed to have reached a stalemate, with Grandland making no obvious moves besides what seemed like prodding of her boarders, though even of this she could not be sure. The brass were tense, however. The atmosphere had the air of inevitability, like something was brewing and this quiet was merely the lull before a storm. Elsa oversaw Arendelle's mobilisation efforts and did her best to stay informed about everything that was happening.

The prisoner was being uncooperative, as expected. She hadn't been there personally, for there was little she could do, but she had demanded daily reports on any and all progress. These were written by Shad himself, something rather unusual for a man of his position.

According to her Commander General, the prisoner had actually started talking in order to stem the inconvenience, and sometimes even outright pain, that his interrogators caused. However, he talked too much, too fast, and very little of what he said was true. It was, she was told, a classic resistance method. Rather than deny answering and prolong your torment, bombard your interrogators with a barrage of useless or untrue information. Babbling was easier than staying silent.

Prime example of such was the latest report she'd read. Shrewd as always, Mertok left nothing out of his reports. Apparently, after hours and hours of grilling interrogation, they had finally managed to get a name out of the man between his sobs and pleas.

The only problem was that that name was Madame Shirley Mertok, the Commander General's late mother, who had passed away over twelve years ago.

Rather than be deterred, Shad was seeing this new stance as progress. They were forcing the prisoner to adapt. Soon, they would get something concrete out of him.

On other news, she'd grown more distant to Hiccup, much to her dismay. Not by any effort on either of their parts, but it seemed circumstances were against them. Thorston was taking up most of his time nowadays, and work was taking up most of hers. Their time together had been sparse, their private_time together even more so.

Still, there were few instances that shone out. Chief among them was none other than a repeat of last week's bath-house incident. Much to her surprise, as she was preparing to take her swim at the hot pool, the door opened and allowed the Chief, blessedly alone, to enter. In her momentary confusion she had asked him what he was doing, to which he'd replied with: "Something crazy." His grin had sent a thrilling chill down her spine.

The rest, as they say, was history.

Regarding Thorston herself, Elsa had gotten to know her better, as the days passed. Being near Hiccup necessitated being in her presence, most of the time. It was tolerable, mostly, but Elsa quickly found that the woman's crass nature just didn't sit well with her. She did her best to be polite, but perhaps some chillness could not be avoided. Literally. She had to catch herself plenty of times to prevent the dropping of temperature at one of the viking girl's rankling comments.

Her dragon seemed much more even tempered than Toothless, at least, and one could often see the two lounging about the grounds, taking long walks, or flying with their riders, high above the castle and enacting clearly fake aerial battles, complete with a fireball or two.

Surprisingly, the presence of another dragon had mellowed people out rather than renew their apprehension. It seemed like one was a novelty, but a second was repetition. Humans it seemed, could get used to basically everything given enough repetition. The fear of the people had given way to open curiosity, and children now brazenly ran

up to the dragons and, with their riders' permission, petted their large heads as best they could. The dragons appeared to be well used to this, and bore their tiny hands and curious pokes with practiced patience. Hiccup apparently had a blast teaching a group of kids how to best scratch a dragon for maximum satisfaction. There were still those wary, of course, but they were few now, and powerless in their numerical inferiority.

It's not that she hated the woman. She just didn't dislike her. Ruffnut Thorston was rude, assuming, quick to judge, had a strained -at best-sense of respect, was something of a slob, and took up almost all of Hiccup's time.

Okay, so maybe that last one should not be held against her. Still, the rest stood. Elsa rather doubted she could get along with the woman, even if she had the energy and patience to commit to the attempt. Both were things she lacked, lately, with how overworked she was. Anna shared her views for the most part, though she put in more of an effort to understand the foreign woman.

One thing she could and did respect was her fighting prowess. Since she'd arrived here she'd worked her way through most of her garrison in the practice ring, managing to maintain an impressive ratio of approximately four victories for each loss she received. Her proficiency with the axe was the talk of many, and she'd even overheard some of her guards discussing her wistfully. Notable among her opponents was Mister Thrandal, who apparently took great delight in taking the arrogant viking down a peg or two, being one of the few able to best her consistently. In fact, she'd heard from several of his superiors talks of a promotion, based solely on his performance against the woman. If Elsa's hunch was correct, mister Gregor was approaching his matches with something far more important than a promotion as a goal. Still, it was none of her business, so she did not interfere.

Most appreciative of her skill was, unsurprisingly, Hiccup himself, who seemed to struggle against his subordinate just as much as her guards did.

When she saw the two about to spar, she questioned Hiccup on his choice of weapon, seeing as he'd picked Smoker over his alleged favorite weapon, the dagger. To that, Hiccup had explained that his fighting style with the dagger is based on mobility and trickery.

"And she knows all of my tricks." He had added with a wry grin. She had eventually won the match, but Hiccup had given her a run for her money, making it a good show for the watching crowd of guards who clapped as she pulled him back to his feet with a nod.

She seemed to thrive in violence, or at the very least actively sought it. Elsa would never understand that.

Elsa was most surprised when her guards announced the Lady Thorston wished to meet with her in her office, alone. Peculiar, to say the least. She was quite certain that her feelings for the viking were mutual, in that Thorston didn't particularly like her, either. Why would she seek her out now? She did not have the authority of Berk's representative, not with Hiccup around, so what was her purpose?

She entered her office, looking curiously around as she approached before her gaze settled on Elsa. Rather than bow or offer a greeting, as was proper, she simply plopped herself down in the chair in front of her desk.

Elsa, already tired from a hard day, began to get annoyed. Starting their meeting with such rudeness? Still, she kept her practiced cool.

"What can I help you with, Miss Thorston?"

"I'm here to talk to you."

No, really? Elsa repressed a childish urge to roll her eyes.

"What's on your mind?"

"You don't get it. I'm not here to talk to the Queen, I'm here to talk to you."

How strange. Was Thorston perhaps unwell, mentally?

"I am the Queen, miss Thorston."

The viking rather ignored her. "I'll be leaving soon."

Elsa had to fight the urge to smile. Good riddance.

"Then I wish you safe travels."

She waved it away. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Listen, I'll get straight to it. What are your intentions towards Hiccup?"

Elsa blinked, then blinked again. What? She must have misheard.

"Excuse me?"

Thorston just tilted her head to the side, her eyes narrow and a touch unfriendly.

"You heard me. What are your intentions?"

Elsa controlled her breathing to stay calm. With effort. "What are you talking about?"

The viking woman rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. You're not being nearly as sneaky as you think you are. I've known Hiccup all his life, I can tell. Now, for the third and hopefully last time, what are your intentions?"

Elsa's irritation was reaching boiling point. Perhaps she'd underestimated Thorston, she had clearly seen through their carefully constructed public formality. Still, that didn't mean that she'd let the viking walk over her.

"I don't see how it's any of your business, Miss Thorston. Your intrusive questions will not be tolerated."

Thornston stopped slouching in Elsa's chair and lent forward, her tone turning low and aggressive. "You listen to me, and you listen well. You had better not be playing with him or manipulating him for your own gain, because if it turns out that you are, I guarantee that you won't like what I'll do to you."

"Are you threatening me?" Elsa said, her voice losing its artificial politeness and turning quiet and dangerous. Still she kept a tight lid on her temper, as well as the temperature of the room.

"You bet your sparkly, icy ass I am."

For a moment Elsa was speechless, shocked into silence at the sheer nerve of the woman. Had she heard right? Surely she hadn't. But then, the challenging glare of the viking woman could not be mistaken. She really had said that. Elsa's eyes narrowed and despite her best efforts, frost began to creep across the desk between them.

"Threatening me in my seat of power is a dangerous mistake, Miss Thorston. At the very least, I could have you arrested."

Thorston waved away her veiled threat and the sharp drop in temperature without blinking. "Whatever. I leave the political stuff to Hiccup, that's what he's for. And you can try and arrest me or whatever after, but you will listen to me now. I'm talking to you not as a queen, but woman to woman."

Elsa had to fight back an undiplomatic reply of her own. Thorston wasn't the first rude person she'd had to talk to. She levelled her narrowed gaze at her, but reigned back her powers as she did so, her paperwork thawing and the room becoming warm again. Though she tried to hide it, she could see the viking woman's clenched muscles relax as it did so, her hands moving casually away from the dagger at her hip. Regardless of her attitude, Thorston had been edgy about her manifestation of power. That, at least, was gratifying.

"What are you saying?" She said with forced calm.

"Just this. If you are playing with Hiccup, if you are lying to him to achieve something, I will hunt you down and end you, ice magic or not. I won't have it, not from you, not from anyone. It tooks us two years, two whole fucking years to bring Hiccup back out again, and I won't let you ruin everything."

Elsa felt that she was missing something. "What are you talking about?"

"For two years after the war he was basically an automaton."

"Automaton?"

"You don't know? They're basically these machines, yeah? They're made so that they look like humans and perform a specific function. Hiccup makes them, sometimes."

Ah, now Elsa got it. "I see."

"Exactly. For two years, he was nothing but the Chief of Berk."

Certainly, he was the best Chief we could have hoped for, but that's _all _he was, you know? Nothing like the Hiccup we knew. Ruthless. Precise. _Scary_. It took a long time to bring Hiccup back out again, and I won't allow you or anyone else to ruin that."

Now Elsa began to form some idea of what the woman was trying to convey. "I understand your concerns, Miss Thorston, but I do not tolerate anyone threatening me. I assure you, any intentions I have towards your Chief have no malicious intent behind them."

Thorston's gaze changed, for lack of a better word. From the challenging glare it morphed into a softer, calculating gaze.

"I mean, I can see why he'd go for you, don't get me wrong. Like, a _Queen_! How can _that _be topped? Hiccup always aimed for the impossible, you know? For those out of his league. But that aside, I can see why he'd go for you. You do look a heck of a lot like her."

Elsa's eyes widened at the implication. She took a few seconds to gather her thoughts. "What are you talking about? Like who?"

Thorston seemed surprised at her question. "He hasn't told you about Astrid?"

Astrid. Finally, a _name_. A name she could connect to the various vague hints he'd dropped to some woman in his past. The unknown woman that Hiccup would mention at the weirdest times, that his face would darken whenever something reminded him of her, and that Elsa felt she had to measure up against.

"Who is Astrid?" She asked, managing to keep her voice level.

Thornton suddenly looked guilty, like she realized she had said something she shouldn't have. She shook her head, and the guilt vanished just as quickly as it'd appeared. "You don't know? Then it certainly isn't my place to tell you, is it? Like, I can see why he'd want to get involved, really. You are a lot like her. And he did always aim high. But remember my promise. If you hurt him, I will hunt you down."

Elsa had heard enough of her. "Leave my office. And be grateful I don't have you taken away."

Thornton seemed to be done anyway. Elsa only had a vague recollection of the viking woman getting up and leaving the room. She was too busy thinking, mulling over the new information in her head.

Many things made sense now, many questions were answered. Another piece of the puzzle that was Hiccup's past was falling into place. Astrid. A single name, a single piece, but it seemed incredibly important. What Thorston had said had had an effect, if not in the way the viking had meant it to.

After an indefinite amount of mulling over, she decided that she had to take her questions directly to the source. She could not think on this any longer without posing her question to Hiccup himself. Making assumptions without his input would be idiotic. He would have to come

clean, at least for certain things. She did not want to be intrusive, but this was something that she had to know.

She sent a servant to locate the Chief, and to request his presence in a balcony near her office. It was not ideal, but it would do. if Hiccup was not particularly busy, he should come.

Elsa got up from her chair, before walking out of her office and finding her way to the balcony. The view was amazing as always, and she leaned on the balustrade, looking out towards the snow capped mountains wreathed in mist, but she did not truly see them. Her mind was elsewhere.

An indeterminable amount of time later, the main focus of her thoughts joined her on the balcony. It was his voice that drew her out of her internal musings.

"You asked to see me, Elsa?"

His voice was casual, free of the fabricated political tone that he'd used at first. She smiled a bitter smile. He'd called her Elsa. Not Queen Elsa. It spoke of the familiarity between them. Admittedly, they were no longer simply two heads of state, they were two people intimately interested in each other. They took a seat on the bench without preamble or words, another thing he would not have done just a short week earlier.

It all just made her angrier than she could have expected.

"Who is Astrid?" She asked, doing away with any and all niceties and greetings in favor of getting straight to the point. It would have been comical to watch his expression if she wasn't so wound up. His eyes widened in surprise and confusion. When he spoke, his voice was low and tight. Assessing.

"Where did you hear that name?"

"Answer me."

He scowled. "Wait, I know. it was Ruff, wasn't it? Dammit, I knew that she was-"

"Hiccup, answer me."

Her tone must have appropriately conveyed her hurt and her anger, because he stopped whatever he was about to say, instead looking at her for a few seconds with measuring eyes. Elsa looked back at him, her gaze just daring him to try and evade her question.

His searching expression vanished, replaced with one of defeat as he let out a heavy sigh, before collecting himself and averting his gaze to look ahead, over the evening horizon.

"Astrid was my wife."

Elsa stilled, hearing the pain in Hiccup's voice. He still wasn't looking at her, just staring at the distant mountains. "Was?" She said, as gently as she could.

"She was killed in combat, three years ago."

It was as she had thought. Elsa hesitated, then placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry." And she meant it. She knew the pain of loss. She would not wish it on anyone.

"Don't be. It is in no way your fault."

"Tell me about her."

He turned and looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Tell me about her." She repeated. "What happened?"

He was silent for a long time, no doubt gathering his thoughts and making decisions on what to reveal. Elsa gave him his time.

"Do you remember what I told you, about the war that claimed my father?"

"I do."

"The same conflict also claimed Astrid." He snorted without humor. "Combined fire from three Nadders. Did you know that Nadder fire can achieve the highest recorded temperature? What am I saying, of course you didn't." He shook his head wildly. "There was nothing to â€œ nothing to make rites for â€œ nothing _left _of her, at the end of the struggle. Her funeral was without a body. Her dragon's remains were lost to the sea. And all of it was, without a doubt, my fault."

Noticing the glistening of his eyes, Elsa did not hesitate to wrap her hands around his shoulders in a silent show of support. If what he'd told her so far was true, then, as harsh it sounded, it actually had been his fault. His naivete and optimism were understandable, of course, but there was no denying that it was his own stance that had brought about the cause for conflict. He knew that well, and giving him false platitudes would not help him, so all she could do was show him compassion. Hiccup stiffened, but did not push her away. She let him gather his strength, push back his sorrow and regain his composure. When he looked ready, several minutes later, she let go of him, and asked the dreaded question.

"Do I resemble her?"

And wasn't that the most important question?

He looked conflicted for a few seconds, and Elsa let him stew on his thoughts as he decided on his answer. In the end, he let out a sigh as he brought up a hand to rub at his eyes.

"Yes." he said, and the word made her almost physically reel with its finality. "You resemble her a great deal, physically. Moreover, you are both strong, independent, imposing, snarky. You represent things I wish I could achieve. In many ways, you remind me of her. It is â€œ unpleasant."

Then, it was as Elsa had feared. As Thorston had implied. "Is that what I am to you, Hiccup? A substitute? The closest thing you could find to your dead wife?" Perhaps she was going over the line, being so blunt, but she had to know. Winter Spirits forgive her, she had to

know.

His eyes immediately landed on her, and he looked furious for a moment, about to snap at her for her daring. She did not back down from his gaze. After a few seconds, he relaxed and averted his eyes again, looking sadder than she'd ever seen him. His shoulder slumped, his expression broke.

"I â€“ I do not know. You remind me of her, but at the same time you are so different. You are different in many, important ways. I â€“ I simply do not know."

"Is that what you meant when you mentioned your reservations?"

"It â€“ yeah."

So â€“ Hiccup himself doubted whether he liked her for her or because she reminded him of his dead wife. Credit to him for understanding the fact, and trying to hold her off because of it. Her opinion of him skyrocketed in that instant.

Still, it made what she had to do next all the harder.

"You know that this can't continue, right?"

He looked at her, and he seemed so sad that she instantly felt bad. She squashed the feeling, steeling her resolve. This wasn't pleasant for either of them, but it had to be done. She didn't want to do this, she didn't want to let him go. Deep down she was terrified that he'd never come back to her.

Still she rose, taking a hold of his hands with hers and drawing him to his feet with her. Still holding his hands, she studied his face for one long moment, before her expression softened and she leaned in, placing a soft, brief kiss to his lips.

After separating, she squeezed his hands before letting go and taking a decisive step backwards and away from him.

"You need to figure this out." She told him, not unkindly.

"I know." he admitted.

"Hiccup, I like you, more than I should." She confessed, looking firm but feeling extremely fragile. "But this isn't fair to either of us. You need to figure this out."

His fingers twitched. He looked like he wanted to reach for her, but he didn't. Instead he said: "I know. I will."

She smiled, the action not really reaching her eyes. After a few seconds, she broke eye contact and walked around him and through the door, leaving the balcony.

She headed straight for her quarters, trying and failing to not think about anything at all. If a few tears loosed themselves from her eyes, silent and unbidden, there was no one around her to see them.

One thought asserted itself as she mechanically went about her

routine and finally fell into bed.

Hiccup would work it out. The situation would resolve itself. One way or another.

Once again, she dreamed of fire.

~E~

11. Hiccup 5, Act I

****Disclaimer:**** Any characters, situations or places that you recognized are the trademarked property of Disney, Dreamworks, and their associates. I humbly use their amazing worlds to tell my story to no profit.

****Acknowledgements:** ******As always, to the Lady Sorrows, who has not been keeping me company lately but still took the time to edit this. Also to the folks of DLP, who keep me motivated to write.

****Notes:** a) ******This was meant to be posted as my New Year's gift to you guys, believe it or not. It was written before even Christmas rolled around. It got delayed so long because the Lady Sorrows couldn't make the time any earlier, and I'd rather wait than subject my readers to the horror that is my unedited work.

100% Sorrows' fault, confirmed.

****b) ******** A major complaint for last chapter was the length. I have thought hard about this, and decided that the complaints were not without merit. I hate to break the PoV format, but I decided to try breaking the remaining two chapters down into smaller parts.

Yes, attentive reader, I did say two more. ACE has two more planned chapters, one for Hiccup and the last one for Elsa, before it reaches its inevitable conclusion. However, since I decided to break them up, they will be more in number but smaller in wordcount. The Hiccup chapter is planned to be 3 parts, while the Elsa chapter is planned to be 2. So you can call that 5 more chapters if it makes you feel better.

****c) ******** There's another thing. You can blame Tuffnut's death on Wixerion. He is the reason I've always planned to give the Thorston twins a painful death. In fact, you can also thank him for the existence of this fic, because it was reading his story that finally made me realize that the only way of finding a crossover in this fandom that doesn't suck was to write it, myself. My success remains to be seen, but the effort is there.

Conversely, you can thank Foxy's Girl for Ruffnut's survival. Foxy's stories are the reason I like Ruffnut, and why I decided to spare her. Go read her stuff. She writes much better than I ever could.

So, without further ado:

* * *

><p>A Chance Encounter

Chapter 11

Act I

~H~

* * *

><p>"Would you quit messing with my hair?"<p>

Hiccup swatted at the hand lazily tousling his hair, and glared at its owner, who was sitting on the rock next to him, in mock anger. The girl let out an honest to Odin giggle-before taking hold of a tuft from the back of his head. He let out a sigh, but made no further effort to stop her.

"I can't help it. Look how long it's grown."

A sting of uncertainty. "You don't like it?" Perhaps he was due for a haircut.

"I like it, you dummy." She said, exasperation as evident in her voice as in her eye-roll. Hiccup let out a nervous laugh.

Even now, months into his relationship with Astrid-with Astrid, who would have thought?- He felt like he would wake up any day now and things would go back to how they used to be. With him being â€œ well, him, and Astrid ignoring his existence.

"Snap out of it, Hiccup." He was jostled back to reality by a small, tightly wrapped hand waving in front of his face, and he smiled to hide his embarrassment.

"Sorry, I spaced out for a bit."

"You're hopeless."

He took her hand in both of his, gingerly. He rubbed her fingers with his own, staring at where they were touching, almost expecting reality to be torn asunder and take his happiness away from him, even for such a simple thing.

"Are you having one of your moments?" He looked up and saw kindness in her wide eyes and teasing smile, and he was lost again.

"I seem to be." he replied, gamely. "Give me a few seconds?"

"As long as you need" She said, squeezing his fingers in gentle assurance.

He shook his head. This was silly. He was perfectly capable of interacting with his girlfriend without turning into some sort of nervous wreck. Occasionally, however, he would have episodes like this one. At least he hadn't tried to write a poem this time. That disaster was never getting repeated.

It just all felt so surreal sometimes, that in a few short months everything had changed so much. He wanted for nothing, because he already had all he'd ever dreamed of. He had the respect of his

people, the acknowledgement of his father, he had Toothless and the other dragons integrating with humans; and he had Astrid. He looked at her hand entwined in his. Definitely more than he had ever thought he'd get.

And that was the problem, really. After a lifetime of failure, these last few months had been miraculous, wondrous, and part of him was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Sometimes it crept up on him, a sick ball of anxiety in the pit of his stomach, and he'd know that people like him didn't get this lucky, that it couldn't last, not forever. He'd feel that metaphorical boot hovering pendulously overhead, waiting to stamp out his happiness forever.

Astrid's golden head snuggled itself further into his shoulder, diverting his dark thoughts. She was good at that. His frown softened and he rested his head atop of hers.

He smiled and averted his gaze, his eyes landing on the forms of Toothless and Stormfly, lazing about under the sun, their harnesses a few feet away. For that matter, they'd been here for a while, hadn't they?

"We should head back." He noted. Astrid groaned dramatically and pushed herself closer to his side, almost making him fall over. Hiccup wrapped his hands around her instinctively, even as color rushed to his cheeks at her proximity. Almost laying on him as she was, her head rested on his shoulder. He turned, in what he hoped was a discreet fashion, and inhaled the smell of her hair. Not quite sweet, but one unique to her that he'd come to recognize as so clearly Astrid.

"Let's stay a while more." She asked, looking up at him with wide pleading eyes. Hiccup groaned, knowing he had no chance.

"Okay. But don't whine to me when you get hungry."

She smiled triumphantly and snuggled back into a more comfortable position. Idly, her hand crept up his back and started playing with his hair again. It had grown to the point of reaching his neck, something she had been keen to point out. He would have objected, but the feeling of her fingers across his scalp was killing any desire he had for complaints.

"You should do something with your hair."

"I thought you said you liked it."

"I do, but still, you should do something."

"Like what?"

"I have an idea."

She sat up straighter as she said this, disentangling her hand from his hair and reaching for her ponytail. With one swift movement, she'd removed the leather band she'd used to hold it, shaking her head so as to allow her hair to fall freely around her shoulders. It glowed, golden, under the afternoon sun. Hiccup swallowed hard, suddenly feeling several degrees hotter. He knew she always kept a spare tie around her wrist, she'd done that on purpose. Freeing her

hair like this for him, however little it lasted. It was both a promise for things to come and an invitation-nay, a challenge-, to make them happen.

Astrid smiled at him teasingly and reached for his hair.

"Wait, wha-"

She shushed his objections as she took hold of some of the hair on the back of his head and expertly began tying it back with the band.

"But Astrid! Aren't hair ties, I dunno, girly?"

She had apparently finished her work, because he felt a sharp pain bloom on his arm, just below the shoulder. She'd punched him!

"Ouch! That hurt, you know!" he said as he rubbed the sore spot. Astrid was glaring at him.

"That is for being judgmental. Bands are perfectly practical for both genders. Why, your dad sports several in his beard."

Difference being, he didn't have a beard. Though he thought that, Hiccup had the good sense not to say it. He'd already been hit, and didn't fancy another one. She would always punch him in the same spot, too.

He reached a hand to the back of his head and felt around, taking hold of the mass of hair that Astrid had tied. Despite what she had said, she hadn't caught enough for it to be considered practical, his hair still fell about his face. Only a token amount of hair was caught, just enough for the band to work. A purely aesthetic choice, then. Still, it wasn't that bad.

"I guess I can live with a band." He said.

Her expression morphed into a satisfied smile before turning mischievous. Before Hiccup had time to question her on it, she had taken hold of his shirt and pulled him closer, gently touching her lips on his. Hiccup smiled and cupped her cheek with one hand, drawing her in. Getting to kiss Astrid still felt delightfully unbelievable to him. A minute later, or perhaps more, they separated, both blushing heavily but with equally satisfied smiles on their faces.

"What was that for?"

"For being you."

Smiling, he took hold of her hand again as they laid back on the furs they were sitting on. Perhaps they could stay out here for a little while longer.

Was it too early to tell her he loved her?

~H~

Hiccup awoke with a surge, finding himself in a sitting position and panting heavily. It took him a few seconds to recognize the strange

surroundings and the unfamiliar, crumpled sheets. It took several more to still his hands that had automatically reached for the person that should be sleeping next to him.

When reality reoriented itself, he fell back into the ridiculously soft pillows with a groan. He pushed sweat-slicked hair out of his eyes, considering his troubled sleep. He hadn't dreamed of Astrid in a good while. The dream, unlike others that would melt out of consciousness even as he tried to remember them, was actually a memory, and thus he could recall it with perfect clarity. His chased the memory away with practiced ease, pushing it back down to where he kept all his memories of Astrid. He treasured every one, but they lived behind locked doors in his head, only to be opened if he didn't feel like functioning that day. He couldn't afford to do that. Not anymore.

What had brought this on, anyway? He hadn't had such trouble with them for a long time.

The realization hit him as soon as memories of last night resurfaced. Oh. Thats why.

He groaned again and pulled the blanket up over his head. He certainly had a talent for such situations, didn't he? Stuck between his growing feelings for Elsa and the ghost of his wife. How wonderfully pathetic of him. The worst part was, he was no closer to figuring out what he was going to do about it than he was last night. Gods, how did he always make such a mess of things?

This was supposed to be his vacation. Vacation. He took a couple months to himself every year whenever possible, to relax. To unwind. Not to make his life even more complicated.

Still, no use snivelling over it now. He'd gotten himself into this, he'd have to figure it out. He had to. He'd promised. Now, if only he knew how.

He got up with a groan, absently noting the shadow of Toothless' curled form on the balcony. He still hadn't had the door repaired, the broken wood lay against the balcony's wall where he'd left it. He'd get around to it sometime. In the meantime, the draft was quite nice.

He took a bath, then saw to Toothless' breakfast before heading to his own. This time he did not need Anna to drag him down to have breakfast with them, something he was still embarrassed about. He wouldn't avoid Elsa, even though she'd made it clear that she wouldn't continue their tentative relationship, if it could be called that, until he sorted out his feelings. Which, admittedly, spoke to her character far more than it did his. That was alright. Hiccup never claimed to be a strong person. He'd had to be on several occasions, out of necessity, but strength had never been in his nature.

Thankfully, the breakfast room was almost filled to the brim with people. Besides the royal sisters and himself, Kristoff was also present, as was the entirety of the Queen's inner council, along with three people that Hiccup was pretty sure he'd never seen before. A bigger table had been procured for the occasion and more servants were milling about to cater to everyone.

The Queen gave him a polite but warm greeting, as was proper, before returning to her various discussions. Hiccup was occupied by the Princess, who seemed particularly eager to talk to him. That seemed strange to Hiccup. Surely Elsa had talked to her about last night. Shouldn't Anna be ~~more~~ angrier? Shouldn't she be shooting off warnings and threats and glaring at him?

But no, the redhead seemed content to make small talk with him about various things. One thing she said, however, varied from the norm. She leaned closer, conspiratorially, and talked low enough that only he would hear.

"Would you like to see the trolls, Hiccup?"

This caught Hiccup by surprise and he raised an eyebrow.

"Really? The trolls?"

She nodded. "Yes. I remember Elsa mentioning your discussion about them. Would you like to get to know them?"

Huh. Now there was an intriguing invitation. Hiccup remembered talking about the trolls with the Queen on his way here. It had sparked his interest then, if only to try and place some truth to Gobber's claims.

"Certainly. Could I?"

"Of course! I'll see when Kristoff has some time and we will all go together. Tomorrow, perhaps, or the day after, we'll go visit Grandpabbie."

"Sounds great. I look forward to it."

After breakfast, Hiccup was all but dragged along with the Princess, to his great disbelief, Ernie trailing behind dutifully. She insisted they spend time together, be it visiting interesting corners of the castle or taking a long, leisure walk out in the city. Anna had dragged Ernie next to them and practically forced the boy into the conversation. Ernie was flustered at first at the familiarity of the Princess's manner towards him, but soon gave up on formality under Anna's determined assault.

Still, nice as it was to see that the Princess seemed intent on showing him she remained his friend, Hiccup begged off after they had lunch. He had to talk to someone, and he couldn't put it off any longer. He'd postponed it so far so that he would have time to think things through and not act rashly. He asked Ernie to ask her over to his quarters, and went through some interesting paperwork that he'd found while he waited.

The door clicked open, but he did not turn to look at his guest while she strolled over.

"Hey Hiccup." She plopped herself on a chair next to his desk, armor grating against the delicate wood. "I was over at the barracks when your boy got me. What's up?"

At this he did turn, leveling a flat stare at Ruffnut.

"What's with the killer look?" Okay, so maybe 'flat' wasn't entirely accurate. He dialed it back slightly.

"What did you do, Ruffnut?"

She attempted a look of confusion, but Hiccup's trained eyes spotted the widening of her own and the awkward shuffling of her hands.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

She was also a terrible liar. This time, he really did glare at her.

"I won't ask again."

She sighed and threw up her hands in defeat. "Alright, alright, so maybe talking to her wasn't my brightest idea. But honestly, how was I supposed to know you hadn't told her about Astrid?" She had the cheek to throw back an accusing look. "That's bad form, man."

Hiccup had to close his eyes and count to ten. It wouldn't do to kill his subordinate. At least not while in a foreign castle.

When he was certain he had a lid on his anger, he opened his eyes and replied. "Keep your advice to yourself. Do you have any idea what you have done?"

"So what if I scared her a little? No one ever died from that."

Hiccup gaped, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You idiot." He snarled. "You tried to intimidate her?"

For a second Ruffnut did her best impression of a frightened rabbit.

"Oh. You ... uh, didn't know about that?"

Hiccup repressed the urge to bash his head on the desk. Or hers. "You could have caused an actual war. If it were anyone other than Elsa, this would have been at the very least a massive diplomatic incident, and severely set us back in negotiations. And that is the best case scenario when you directly threaten the supreme leader of a foreign nation, who also happens to be an insanely powerful sorceress. War, Ruff. That's a record, even for you."

The gravity of her error seemed to begin to dawn on her. "But it was a personal matter, not state."

"It was personal, but not yours. Disregarding that, you're not in a position where you can talk to the Queen and ignore her position."

"And you are?"

"Yes. No! That's not the point here!"

"Really?"

He slammed his clenched fist into the desk, hard enough for the inkpot to topple and for his hand to develop a sharp ache.

"Dammit, Ruff."

That seemed to snap her out of her sarcastic streak. She was silent for a few seconds, during which the only sound was caused by the ink slowly dripping on the floor.

"I fucked up, didn't I?"

"You certainly did. All the good relations that I developed since I came here, our trade agreement with Arendelle, you put all of that at risk with one of the most spectacularly moronic moves I have seen to date."

"I'm in trouble, right?"

"Damn right you are. I haven't decided what your punishment will be just yet, but you can explain to Barf why he and you will be grounded for the remainder of the year. Anything short of an actual war breaks out, you stay in the village. And don't you dare dally on your way back, either. I know exactly how long it should take you."

The prospect of months of grounding made Ruffnut's face twist into a visage of horror.

"But Hiccup-"

"Shut up." He cut her off, still glaring. He hadn't expected her to actually do the sensible thing and stop talking, he would have rather enjoyed increasing the severity of her punishment.

"What's gotten into you, Ruff? That was stupid, even by your standards."

"Hey!"

"It was."

"Well. I'm sorry, I guess. I just didn't want to see you in a mood again. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I didn't think about it long."

'In a mood'. That was a kind way of describing his funk after Astrid's death. Still, then and now were very different situations.

"You'll have to do better than that." Hiccup insisted. Ruffnut exhaled loudly, running a hand through one of her braids as she thought.

"I just | I've seen how you look at her. How you act around her. I didn't think you could recover from it if she turned out to be using you."

"Wait, what are you saying?"

Ruff looked at him like he was missing the obvious.

"You love her."

Hiccup blinked at her dumbly, his anger totally derailed by this sharp right turn in the conversation. "News to me." He managed after a moment. Ruff snorted.

"Really, Hiccup? Denial? That's what you're going with?"

"It's not denial, it's the truth." He replied shortly, irritation rising like the tide. He leaned back in his chair. "I like her, no doubt, but love? I didn't know you'd turned into such a sap since I last saw you."

"Call it whatever you want, my point stands." Ruff shot back. "What do you see in her, anyway? Magical Queen of a fancy castle, loved by all opposed by none, it seems. I'll bet its been bowing courtiers, sparkling dresses and pretentious dinners her entire life. She was born into this, I bet she hasn't sprained an ankle in her whole life, never mind having to fight for a single thing of value." Ruff said derisively. "After all, that's what servants and soldiers are for."

Hiccup glared at her. "You'd be surprised. We don't have the monopoly on tragedy, or hardship."

She raised an eyebrow, disbelief written all over her face. He shook his head.

"Not my tale to tell."

"Tragedy I can buy, considering her age, but hardship? Really? What, did she run out of glitter for her hair?"

"See, this is exactly why I don't send you on diplomatic missions."

"Right, fine, whatever. Let's not stray from the point."

"That being?"

"Me, asking you what you see in her. Is it her resemblance to Astrid? I admit, I did a bit of a double take when I first saw her. She does kind of look like her. I mean, if you squint. If Astrid had grown up Queen of sparkly dress castle and had a dozen maids to do her hair every day while she played with snow. "

Hiccup ignored her digs at Elsa. Because in her own way Ruff was right on the money, not about Elsa, but about their resemblance. And even then, not in the way Ruff thought about it.

He'd thought about it before, of course. Many times. He had reached no conclusion. Of course, the question had never been about Elsa resembling Astrid, not exactly. No, if that had been it, he would have problems much closer to home, where the culture was similar and he could have found someone who was molded by circumstance to resemble Astrid more clearly. Feisty, blonde warrior women were not exactly in short supply in his part of the world. No. It was more complicated than that.

He'd be the first to admit that there was a superficial resemblance.

They were both blond haired, blue-eyed, confident and far, far out of his league. But in temperament they were poles apart.

Astrid had been all fiery temper and quick violence, fated to excel at everything she set her eyes on. She shone the brightest with a weapon in her hand or people under her command. A born Viking Chief if ever he'd seen one. Elsa was more like him. Quieter, more controlled. Fighting, though they did it with different means, was a thing to be done only out of necessity. Elsa was not a warrior, she was a protector. A Queen.

But even so, there was no denying the quiet power that both women possessed. The way they demanded everyone's attention by simply being there, or the way they would assert themselves with but a word or a look. Elsa was different than Astrid in most ways, but sometimes she would say something, stand in a certain way, and it would catch Hiccup like a kick to the ribs. He'd forget, sometimes, just for a second, and turn, irrationally expecting to look at Astrid's face, only to see Elsa and realize his folly.

Was that it, then? Was he simply attracted to women more powerful than him? Women who he should, by all rights, have exactly zero chances with? Or were those instances where Elsa reminded him of Astrid the cause of his attraction?

That couldn't be completely right though, for he found himself equally attracted when Elsa did things Astrid would never do.

He was no closer to finding a solution than he was this morning. All he had managed to do was painfully remind himself that he was still not over his wife's death.

"-cup? Hiccup?"

He was brought out of his musings by Ruff shaking his shoulder, perhaps with more force than necessary. He slapped her hand away with a scowl.

"Don't do that."

"I called your name like ten times. You weren't listening."

"You probably had nothing interesting to say anyway."

She made of show of laughing dramatically. "Look who regained his sense of humor. Stop evading the subject."

"Look, I won't deny some similarities, but that's not all there is to it. I'm not even sure, myself."

"So you love the Queen but you don't know if it's because you're projecting your dead wife on her? That's pathetic, Hiccup, even by your standards."

Hiccup frowned at her. "Watch your tongue. You're my friend, Ruff, but I don't tolerate this from anyone, not even you."

She made a show of rubbing her eyes like a child. "Boo hoo, my wife is dead. The world is bleak and terrible and I will never be happy again. Woe is me, cursed be my fate-"

"Ruffnut. Enough."

"Boo hoo, I'm such a wimp that I clamp up for years and can't get over my pain even after-"

"I said _enough_."

He was seething, and trying his best not to lash out and do or say something that he knew he would later regret. A distant part of himself idly noticed that his hands were shaking, so he closed them into fists.

He could not take out his anger on Ruff. She was trying to help, in her own way. She just \textendash didn't understand.

Ruff's voice was uncharacteristically quiet when she spoke. "Oh, I don't understand, do I?"

Hiccup blinked. Had he said that out loud?

The anger he'd been struggling to hold back drained from him, leaving nothing but a sick, empty feeling. He had forgotten, in his indignation, the empty space by her side. He looked at her. Ruff's eyes were flat with fury, and sparkled with the tears she'd never let fall in his presence. _Anyone's_ presence.

"I didn't mean it like that. You know I didn't." He said quietly.

" You self-centered _tit_. Do you really think you're the only one hurting from his losses? You really think that you're the one who's had it _worst_?"

"I don't. That's not what I meant. I'm sorry."

She was fiddling with her braid in a particular way that Hiccup knew meant she was extremely agitated, but unable to beat up whatever was causing her distress. It was a rare sight, to see Ruffnut Thorston nervous.

"Maybe you should have a talk with Snotlout, aye?"

Hiccup flinched. His cousin had never been the same. None of them had, but Snotlout had, arguably, lost the most.

"Do you know what the worst part of losing Tuff was?"

Hiccup closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly.

"You don't have to do this, Ruff."

Again, she ignored him. She wasn't even looking at him, her eyes glazed over in a faraway look. "I get it, you loved Astrid very much and you miss her, but do you know what _real_ loss is? To lose a part of _yourself_. Tuff was \textendash he was my twin. He was always there. As far back as I can remember myself, it was the two of us. We never agreed, we fought a lot, I didn't even like him all that much most of the time, but he was always there, you know? He was as much a part of me as my hand, perhaps even more so. Every time I woke up, I saw his stupid face across the room, snoring. Every time I ate, he was there,

being all gross. Every time I was angry, we would fight. Every time I was crying, he was there, being all awkward and angry in my behalf and getting into fights way over his head. He. Was. Always. _There_." She said the last part slowly, emphasizing the words as if they meant everything. In a sense, they did.

Hiccup did not dare interrupt. Ruff shook her head in dismissal, a vain attempt to conceal the tears that had escaped her tight grasp on them. When she spoke again, her voice was angry and harsh.

"And that's the way I always thought it would be, you know? Us against the world. Even if I ended up giving up the life of a shieldmaiden eventually, I figured it would always be me and him, just with some new additions to the family. It made me angry, it frustrated me, but there was no thought in my head, no possible future for me without Tuffnut. It seemed inconceivable, until it happened."

Hiccup could not help it, and he placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing in an attempt at comfort. What she said, what she described â€“ he had been wrong. She really did understand. He'd made an ass of himself, _again_.

"Soâ€“" She paused, choking back hitch or a sob, before continuing, rushing the words out "So don't you dare tell me that I don't understand what you're going through. I get it. We all do. You're hurting. But you need to get over that and move on with your life, Hiccup."

He shook his head. "I'm not strong like you guys, Ruff."

She gave him a disbelieving look.

"Not strong? Hiccup, you're the strongest person I know. You're wimpy, and you're sometimes pathetic and you whine a lot but you are, bar none, the strongest person on Berk. If you can't do it â€“ if _you_ can't do it, no one can. There's no one else."

Hiccup was once again rendered speechless. In the face of such faith, what could he say? He had never really understood his ability to inspire loyalty in his rough, independent people. Yet they followed him. Trusted him when he could barely trust himself, most days. He could see it in her eyes, rock solid certainty. In _him_. He wished he could borrow some of it.

"I can't â€“ I â€“ I don't know _how_." Her face, previously set in a hard, angry mask now softened, and she took his hands in hers.

"It's not easy. Every day is a fight. Every morning, I expect to hear his snoring and see his stupid face. Whenever I get mad, I instinctively reach out and try to punch him. These things will happen. It takes time, effort and pain. But it must be done. Every day, you must fight it. Perhaps you can be happy again."

"I just â€“ it's not like I haven't been trying, Ruff."

She shook her head. "You need to let her go, Hiccup. I don't care what you do with sparkly. Be with her, don't be, that's up to you. But you need to let Astrid go. You're only hurting yourself, and her too, from where she watches in Valhalla. She's going to beat you

black and blue if you waste your life away, and so will I before I see you do that."

And wasn't that a sign that sometime, somewhere, he'd gone terribly wrong? When it was Ruffnut, of all people, giving him advice?

"You're right, Ruff."

"Damn straight I am."

"Thanks, I think."

"Don't mention it. What are friends for?"

He shook his head in exasperation, a small smile on his lips. It was good to have friends.

"You're still in trouble though."

She looked stricken. "What? Even after all my sagely wisdom?"

"Yes, even so."

"You're a cruel, ungrateful person, Hiccup Haddock."

"And you're grounded, Thorston."

She snorted in good humor and shook her head. "You should also probably know that I'll leave in a couple of days."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. I got a message from the Queen's office, that she'd like to talk to us about a plan. Maybe it will require your presence for a little while longer."

"My presence? Huh. That should be interesting. In any case, are we done? Can I go? No offense, but I left a rather handsome, half-naked foreigner in the practice range when you summoned me."

Hiccup guffawed. "Yes, you can go."

"See ya."

She rose, heading for the door, and Hiccup turned back to his papers. Just at the door, Ruff paused, idly looking at him over her shoulder.

"And Hiccup?"

"Hm?"

"If you turn into the spineless coward from before the Understanding, or into that unfeeling person you were a few years ago, I'll kill you myself."

~H~

The rest of the evening passed without much of note. Ruffnut declined his invitation to join him and Toothless on their evening flight, citing other matters. No doubt these other matters were half-naked

and sword-wielding, but Hiccup didn't mind. His flight that evening was relaxed and slow, unlike their usual death-defying stunts. Toothless, no doubt sensing his friend's pensive mood, glided across the tops of the red-stained clouds in wide, lazy circles. Giving Hiccup the peace necessary to think, as the sun dipped lower and lower.

He was joined later by the princess and Kristoff. The blond man informed him that he had contacted the trolls, and that Hiccup was welcome to visit. Anna then said that she had cleared tomorrow evening for the visit, and that it should not interfere with Hiccup's mission.

When asked 'What mission?' the princess had covered her mouth with her hands and blushed a furious red.

"I messed up," she had said "please don't tell Elsa. I guess she'll tell you later."

Hiccup agreed, and that was that. They spent the rest of their time together with Kristoff explaining how the trolls worked as a society, and providing anecdotes from his life with them while Anna mercilessly teased Ernie, who did his best to remain unaffected.

He spent some time before bed writing into his notebook. He hadn't done that in a while, which was a shame. He lingered in one of the early pages, where a full-body sketch of Astrid lay. He run his fingers over the sketch, wondering what he would do if he could speak to her again, just once.

Still, he spent some time writing his recent experiences down, along with sketches of interesting things he had seen around the castle. As was his wont, he got distracted as he sketched, barely looking at the paper while he allowed the relaxing motions to guide his thoughts.

When he refocused, some time later, and looked at his sketch again, he was only vaguely surprised to see a sketch of Elsa's smiling face looking up at him, next to some winch mechanism that he'd seen at the docks.

He closed the notebook with a sigh.

From outside the balcony, Toothless let out a mournful warble. Hiccup got up and walked over to his curled friend. He tripped on the broken door he'd abandoned on the balcony door, and would have fallen, but Toothless' tail caught him just in time.

He sat on the dragon's side with a smile, allowing his wing to close around him and engulf him in warmth.

"I'm sorry, bud. I'll fix the door sometime."

Toothless' reply was a dismissive growl. Hiccup chuckled.

"Yeah. Sorry. I know I haven't really been myself lately. I know I've ignored you a lot. I'm sorry for that, too."

Though he couldn't exactly decipher Toothless' growls, the gentle tip with his snout reeked of compassion. Looking at his best friend's

gentle green eyes, Hiccup could never understand how they had ever believed dragons were mindless demons.

"It's this place, I think. This part of the world." Hiccup said.
"It's like â€| like there is no time for dragons here. No place. Like the world is moving too fast for dragons."

On Toothless' irritated grunt, Hiccup shrugged. "It doesn't make much sense to me, either. It's just a thought. But mark my words, bud. We won't be staying for much longer. I just â€| I don't think there's a place here. For us, I mean."

It still amazed Hiccup how much he could derive from his friend's various noises. It wasn't a language. It was much more instinctual than that, but he could almost understand him. The worry in his tone was almost laughable. Hiccup rubbed his friend's underbelly soothingly.

"It's not just you, buddy. Don't be stupid. It's me, too. This place is beautiful but â€| we don't belong here. Either of us. I'm beginning to realize that."

Toothless' reply was to curl up around him further. Here, like this, all of Hiccup's worries and problems seemed less than silly. Here, he could relax and be himself, cut off from the rest of the world, but for Toothless.

Hiccup really did not want to get up. "Perhaps I will spend the night here. Thanks, bud."

The steady beat of Toothless' heart lulled Hiccup to a blissful sleep.

~H~

When Hiccup awoke, he felt more rested than he had in weeks. He blinked repeatedly, chasing the bleariness away. It took him a few seconds to realize that the incessant sound was a voice. It took him a few more to recognize it.

"Hiccup?" Repeated the voice he knew belonged to Ernie. "Are you â€| here somewhere?"

"Mmm what is it?"

"Oh. You are here. I â€| didn't realize."

Hiccup took stock of his surroundings. He had slept under Toothless' wing. Even though the marble balcony floor was hard, Toothless' paw and side provided enough comfort, and the heat in his belly enough warmth. He had slept like this for weeks on end when the two of them were traveling. Toothless made a very comfortable tent. Hiccup stretched and winced a little. Feather beds had spoiled him these last few weeks. Everything ached.

"Yeah. I'm up, I'm up."

Toothless obligingly raised his wing as he released a massive yawn, just waking up, himself. Hiccup held onto the tip of Toothless' tail and allowed the dragon to pull him to his feet, where he proceeded to

pop his back to a series of satisfying cracks.

"That felt good." He noted. He looked at his aide. Ernie looked relieved, but also nervous. "Everything okay, Ernie?"

"It's just ¢ when I came to wake you, you weren't in your bed. I assumed you woke up earlier. I didn't see you under Toothless' wing. You missed breakfast."

"Oh." Had he overslept? That was embarrassing. He hadn't overslept in a good while. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

Oh. Well, crap. He had really overslept. "Let me guess. I have to be somewhere, right?"

Ernie nodded. "You have a meeting with the Queen and the Lady Thorston soon."

Hiccup snorted. "Lady? Don't let her hear you say that."

"Why is that, Hiccup?"

"She's a Shieldmaiden, not a Lady, and she's prone to pointedly reminding people of the difference with sharp objects. Call her a lady in her face and you better be able to wield a sword."

"I ¢ see." Perhaps it was his tone, but Hiccup followed his instincts and looked at Ernie. The young man had the faintest flush in his face. Hiccup grinned, wrapping an arm around Ernie's shoulders, who stiffened.

"Does itty bitty Ernie have a crush on big, bad Ruff, by any chance?"

The boy's furious blushing would have given him away, even if his stammering didn't.

"I ¢ I don't know what you're talking about. And would you please remove your hand?"

Hiccup obliged, still grinning. "As you wish. But I'm warning you kid, Ruffnut would eat you alive."

"Perhaps ¢ Then again, perhaps you underestimate me."

Hiccup's eyes widened. When he looked at Ernie again, the young man gave him a small smile, shaky but challenging. Ruff intimidated Vikings, never mind people like Ernie. The boy really had it in him, it seemed. He felt his respect for him rise a few notches.

That didn't stop him from laughing his ass off.

"It's not that funny." Ernie protested.

"It is plenty funny."

"Are you saying I couldn't do it?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Hiccup tried unsuccessfully to keep the laughter from his voice. "I'd hate to see what was left of you even if you did succeed. Besides, Ruff tends to like her men a little."

"Well then, what would you suggest? Do you have any advice for me?" Said Ernie, determinedly ignoring Hiccup's jab.

Hiccup sobered up a little "Wait, are you serious? What about that what was it, a maid?"

Ernie shook his head.

"You do know she'll be leaving in a few days, right?"

"Didn't seem to stop you."

Hiccup's eyes widened again at the implication of Ernie's words. Of course, he had no illusions that the boy hadn't known, but to come out and say it like that wow. Ernie seemed to realize what he said, because he gasped, palm immediately flying to his mouth as if to snatch the words back.

"I didn't mean me. I'm sorry, my lord, it's none of my business" "

"Woah there, hold it. It's alright, relax." Ernie looked on the verge of an all out panic attack, Hiccup put a hand on his shoulder. "It's alright Ernie. You're a friend and I trust you. It's okay to talk about that if you want to."

He shook his head. "It really is none of my business. I just meant to say that, even if there is no promise for the future, perhaps a case can be made for the present."

Hiccup blinked, his response dying in his throat. What Ernie had said it made an awful lot of sense, and he suddenly felt incredibly stupid. What was it lately, that he would receive insightful advice from the people he least expected?

He clapped Ernie on the back.

"I like your attitude. You're a born winner."

"You think so?"

"I know so. I'll see if I can get Ruffnut to tutor you on swordplay today. The rest is up to you."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Sure I would." Hiccup rather doubted Ernie's chances when his competition included the likes of Gregor, but hell, he had managed to win over Astrid. He had seen the impossible happen. Perhaps even twice. This was nothing.

"Well, uh, thank you." And that was the end of that conversation, though Hiccup couldn't shake away the smile on his face.

They found Ruffnut waiting for them outside of Elsa's office,

thankfully in normal clothes rather than battle attire. He playfully shoved Ernie's shoulder, and received a blushing glare in return. Thankfully, Ruff didn't spare Ernie a glance.

"I was on time, and you're late? Must be Ragnarok."

"Very funny. Ernie, if you would?"

"Uh, right." Composing himself, Ernie stood up straighter, knocked on the Queen's door, and went in to announce them. Inside, waiting for them, were not only the Queen, but also the Commander General and several other men who wore uniforms similar to the General. Elsa was wearing a blue dress, along with a pair of long gloves. She smiled briefly upon seeing him, but things felt...official. Hiccup mentally put on his Chief helmet, before walking smartly into the room.

"Chief Haddock, Miss Thorston, welcome. Please, sit. We have much to discuss." The Queen greeted. Hiccup returned the greeting, and took a seat in front of Elsa's desk, as did Ruff.

"How can we be of service?"

"Commander General?" Elsa said, giving the man next to her the word.

"Thank you, my Queen. As it happens, Chief Haddock, we require your assistance in a plan we concocted, to lure out the people responsible for your attack."

"We're listening."

"As I don't think you're aware, we recently captured an infiltrator, who seems to be affiliated with the people who came after you. After extensive interrogation, we have managed to extract some information out of him. We believe that we can use that information to form a trap, in the city of Varnas, a few hours' ride from Arendelle."

"What is your plan, then?"

Here, the man next to Mertok spoke. He was younger and more heavily built, with short, dark hair.

"Greetings, I am Protector Divisive Vren. As the general was saying, our plan is to stage a trap in a place where we are positive the enemy has enough of a presence to act immediately, without waiting for assistance from other clusters."

"You've uncovered the network, then?"

"We are beginning to. We believe we should act now, before our captive's absence forces a reshuffling of the enemy's forces."

"I see." Said Hiccup neutrally. "And why do you need us?"

"You, Chief Haddock, are the bait."

He blinked. Ruff opened her mouth, but he shot her a warning look and she closed it again. He rubbed his chin with his hand, thinking.

"I understand your thinking. Yes, it makes sense. If those people are after me, then I would be the best bait. However, I don't think they will attack in Toothless' presence, after what happened to their last attempt."

"That is correct." Vren said, nodding. "Which is why your dragons will remain here."

At this, Hiccup frowned. Elsa must have noticed it, because she hurried to explain.

"Of course, we are only asking for your help, not demanding it in any way. This is a favour asked by my government. Refusal will not affect our negotiations in the slightest."

Hiccup nodded. "But our presence is necessary for your ruse to work."

"That it is." Elsa acknowledged. "However, I'd have thought you would be eager to make a move against the people who ordered the hit on you."

"You would be right, in this case. Tell us more about your plan."

Vren picked up again. "You two will ride to Varnas. Some reason will be give for your presence, as well as the absence of the dragons. There, we will switch you with doubles wearing your armor, who will proceed to walk, with minimal guard, into the part of the city where we know the enemy has a strong presence. If all goes well, they will see it as an opportunity too good to ignore. Meanwhile, our agents are lying in wait around the city in civilian disguises, and will close around the enemies as soon as their trap is sprang."

"Why is our presence necessary if you already have believable doubles?"

"The change will be right before the expected time of attack. Any sooner, and the risk of discovery is too high. But do not fear, you will be in a safe place, well guarded."

"That is not my concern." Hiccup said, narrowing his eyes at the man. "Nor do I wish to hide while someone else risks his life in my stead."

"Regardless, Chief Haddock," the Commander General said, "we will not actually risk your life in an engagement. You will not be permitted near the site. If you decline to the switch, then I'm afraid we'll have to cancel the operation."

Hiccup examined the older man. His face was held in an expert expression of firm civility, whatever was going on behind it Hiccup couldn't guess. But he could tell the man wasn't prepared to negotiate on that point.

"You said your agents are already there? How did you organize this when you were not certain of our cooperation?"

Queen Elsa opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of

it and refrained. She turned to look at her General. Mertok spoke.

"I arranged it, discreetly. The Queen did not yet know, but I felt it for the best."

Hiccup twined his fingers, resting his chin on them as he thought. If he declined, he would basically waste all the time and resources Arendelle put into making this whole operation possible, not to mention a perfectly good chance to get back at his attackers. It seemed perfect, but he still hesitated. Something held him back. Looking at the steadfast Commander General, he realized that it was this man and his sharp, calculating gaze.

"I suppose this whole operation is under your direct control, General Mertok?"

"That it is, Chief. Is that not to your satisfaction?"

Did Hiccup imagine the flash of challenge in the man's eyes?

"Of course it is." He answered mechanically.

Perhaps trying to diffuse the tension, Queen Elsa interjected. "So, do we have your cooperation?"

Hiccup took some time to think it over. "What do you think, Ruffnut?"

Ruffnut evidently had taken the time to phrase her feelings a little more diplomatically. She paused for a moment and said: "Sounds like a solid plan, though I'm wary of leaving Barf behind. If you really think I'll let someone else fight instead of me, you're mistaken."

Hiccup was almost proud of her.

"Miss Thorston," the Protector Divisive said, "we have already talked about this. If you refuse the switch, thenâ€" "

"I heard you the first time." She cut him off. "I still disagree."

"Miss Thorstonâ€" "

This time, Hiccup cut him off. "Yes, yes, we know. We'll play by your rules. When will the operation take place?"

"You ride tomorrow."

"I see. Can I expect the details in writing before then?"

"No, the information is confidential and too risky to be put to paper. You will be further briefed along the way. Is that acceptable?"

"It is. Will that be all?"

"Indeed."

"Then, if you'll excuse us."

Hiccup nodded in their general direction before rising, Ruffnut following in his stead. As he made to leave, the Queen also rose.

"Chief Haddock, a word?" He nodded, and the Queen followed them out into the hallway.

"Anna told me about your visit to the trolls. I wish I could go with you, but alas, time does not permit."

"Do not trouble yourself. We should not be gone long."

"Good to hear. Perhaps, when you return, we can spend some time together?"

On Ruff's suggestive grin, Elsa hurried to add "All of us, I mean."

"I have a better idea." Hiccup said. "I know that you and Anna have been wondering about what happened during a particular part of our engagement, the one where you saw me glide."

"I believe that you explained the mechanics behind your gliding to me before, Chief Hiccup. However, a demonstration would be more than welcome."

Hiccup smiled. "How about something even better?"

"I'm afraid I do not follow."

"How would you like to see a man fly, Queen Elsa?"

She raised a delicate eyebrow, and Hiccup had to fight down the urge to do something imprudent in the middle of a hallway.

"It sounds ridiculous, but I have learned not to discount ridiculous things when it comes to you, Chief Hiccup."

"Thanks, I think."

She let out a melodious laugh that did terrible things to his stomach.

"I will see you tonight, then. Give my regards to Grandpabbie."

"I will. Have a nice day."

"And you both."

They watched her walk off, until Ruffnut broke the silence.

"Are you really going to do that?"

"Yup."

She snorted. "Show off."

"If you've got it, show it."

"Hear hear."

"So, what do you really think?"

"That there's no way I'm letting some snot-nosed local impersonate me and fight while I'm twiddling my thumbs. Are you really going to agree to that?"

He scoffed. "Of course not, but we need them to think that I will, so that the plan can proceed."

She smirked, shoving his shoulder playfully. "You may not be as dumb as you look, after all."

"Speaking of dumb, what do you say about giving my buddy Ernie a few one-on-one sword tutoring sessions?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, my friend. Funny, cute, honest, all around great guy." He said with an innocent grin.

"Are you setting me up with your assistant?"

"And if I am?"

"So you get to dance sideways with the Queen but all I get is a simple assistant?"

"Would you rather the Queen?"

"Not really my type but I'll be damned if those hips don't make me want toâ€""

"Oka~ay enough of that thought, thanks." Hiccup cut her off, fighting down a blush and failing.

Ruff let out a barking laugh. "Did ickle Hiccup bite off more than he could chew, perhaps?"

"Let's return back to the matter of Ernie, yeah?"

"Dunno. I guess he's cute but isn't he, like, thirteen?"

"He's actually almost seventeen."

She tilted her head in consideration, before shooting him a wicked grin. "Huh. He looks kind of younger. No problem then, I'm sure I can teach the boy a thing or two. Maybe even three, if he's a fast learner."

"Just remember that we'll be leaving soon."

"What? Afraid that big bad Ruff will be too rough with your little friend?"

"No, not exactly. He's still just a kid, so play nice."

"He's a delicious piece of fresh man-meat, is what he is." She said

dismissively. "Besides, you brought him to my attention. On your head be it."

"Ruff, I'm serious. Be good."

She let out a dramatic sigh. "Fine, no corrupting the innocent youth. You always ruin my fun."

"Perhaps you could limit yourself to actually teaching him the sword?"

She snorted. "You keep telling yourself that."

~H~

The evening of that same day, he met Anna and Kristoff in the Courtyard, wearing his leather riding clothes and a cloak, though he did not take the harness. Toothless would stay behind with Barf, seeing as the trolls were in a nearby forest. Ruffnut had also begged off, informing him with glee that she would be having her first tutoring session with Ernie while he was away. He rather feared for his aide, but he had asked for this and youths should be allowed to make their own mistakes in order to learn.

Ernie would probably be one big bruise tomorrow. Hiccup only prayed that Ruff had the good sense to start with wooden swords.

Presented with a horse, Hiccup was reminded of his weird distaste for the animals. It really wasn't their fault, gods knew the poor beasts tried their best, and had their own brand of intelligence. However, most people would parallelize them with dragons and while Hiccup could see how that would make sense superficially, it couldn't be further from the truth than comparing a frog to a dog.

Not to mention, he never really got the hang of riding one of the damn things.

It took some time to get him properly settled on the saddle, to his embarrassment. Interestingly, Kristoff actually rode on his reindeer, Sven. Hiccup supposed that he wasn't one to talk about weird mounts, but it still left an impression on him.

The ride was, to him at least, entirely uncomfortable and much too long, although he knew that it couldn't have been more than three hours since they left the palace that they entered a shadowed forest. Hiccup had to admit it was interesting travelling so slowly through the silent forest. His usual method of transportation had him gliding high above the treetops, the forest spread out beneath like an endless ocean. To his own private amusement, being carried beneath the great fir trees had become a rather unfamiliar perspective for him.

The path that Kristoff led them through was tricky, and often followed no path at all. Hiccup was rather lost by the time they arrived in a big clearing, one rife with weird round stones and a lot of moss.

They stopped, tying the two horses just out of the clearing while Kristoff and Sven moved to the center.

"Hey guys," the ice-master greeted the thin air, "I'm back, and I brought a friend I want you to meet."

Who was Kristoff talking to â€| exactly? The stones? Someone he couldn't see?

As he and Anna also walked to where Kristoff was, he leaned closer and whispered.

"Where are the trolls?"

Rather than reply, Anna suddenly grabbed his arm and pulled him back, mid-stride.

"Whatâ€" "

"Don't step on them." She scolded him. "That's rude."

Hiccup looked down and saw that he had been about to step his prosthetic on one of the spheres. He ignored the fact that he would have probably fallen. "That's a troll?"

He was almost braced for the squeaky voice that answered. Almost.

"Well I never! Young man, I'll have you know that I'm as troll as one can be." The stone â€| was no longer a stone. Rather, it had turned into a short, somewhat hairy, and decidedly round being with pudgy, female features.

Hiccup's mind had emptied in shock, but after a moment he pulled himself together and offered the troll-lady an apologetic smile.

"My apologies. I meant no offense, madame troll." He breathed a sigh of relief when his assessment of her gender seemed to be correct and she beamed at him.

"Aaw, such a polite young man. You're forgiven, darling."

More and more stones turned into the same pudgy creatures, the tallest barely reaching his waist. They crowded around him, Anna and Kristoff, talking at the same time and over each other, offering greetings, compliments and questions. Hiccup was rather overwhelmed, not knowing what to do and unable to answer any one troll.

"Oy, give the boy some room, would you?" He heard an elderly voice call out, and immediately the trolls stopped crowding him and moved back, though not without some grumbling.

Hiccup located the troll that had spoken. He was decidedly male, and looked older than the rest of the trolls. At the very least, he looked craggier. He also had some superficial accessories, something the other trolls lacked. Hiccup took a wild guess.

"You must be Grandpabbie. It is an honor to meet you." He said, bowing deeply. Hiccup would like to think that he was a good judge of character, and something told him that this troll was particularly worthy of respect.

He noticed Kristoff, Anna and the rest of the trolls move deeper into

the woods, already engrossed in various topics, no doubt giving him and the elder space and privacy.

The old troll grinned at him, his face transforming into a maze of cracks and wrinkles. "You are indeed as smart as I have heard, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock."

"You know of me, wise one?"

"Please, child, call me Grandpabbie or simply Pabbie. I already feel old." He indicated a couple of presumably actual rocks nearby and they both sat down.

"As you wish, Grandpabbie."

"Yes, I have heard of you. The wind has carried tales of your deeds even to our lands. Words of bravery, of sacrifice, but also of danger."

Hiccup hesitated, unsure. "I'm afraid I don't understand, elder."

"Your actions have earned you much respect, friend of dragons. You are often discussed, in certain circles."

"I | do my best to help as many as I can."

"Aye, child, of that I have no doubt. Yet a warning I carry, for you."

Hiccup leaned forward, so as to be almost on the same level as the elder troll. It didn't take a genius to guess that warnings from a being such as Grandabbie were to be taken with utmost seriousness.

"Please, tell me."

"Many view you with wariness, friend of dragons. They wonder, when will your campaign end?"

Hiccup lamented the fact that asking him about socks, at this point, would be really inappropriate.

"I seek only to end the war in all the provinces of the archipelago, Grandpabbie."

"Aye, I know, you seek only to protect. Commendable, no doubt. However, you are teetering on a delicate edge. When does protection become control? At which point does safety mean oppression?"

Despite himself, Hiccup frowned. "I would never oppress my people or anyone else, elder."

The troll gave him a penetrating gaze. Hiccup had locked gazes with many people and things before, and never had he felt like he could hide nothing from his beholder.

Grandpabbie shook his head. "Be careful, young one. Unless you are, you run the risk of becoming the very thing you fought so hard to destroy."

Hiccup's mind helpfully provided an image of the Red Death, huge and monstrous, unleashing a torrent of hellfire on the Viking ships. He shook his head.

"No. Not that. Never that."

"You must tread carefully, friend of dragons. Your destiny is one of greatness, but it is not yet certain to which side the scales will tip."

"I will, elder. Thank you for your warning." He went to stand, before a knobbed walking stick pressed him gently back down onto his rock.

"There is \mathbb{e} one more thing that troubles you. Speak to me, Hiccup. You believe I can be of further assistance, do you not?"

"If you know that, elder, then you already know the matter that troubles me."

The troll laughed. "Smart, friend of dragons, smart. Indeed, I am aware of what burdens your heart." The troll moved his hands, and the light obeyed him, folding into images. The first one was made of silhouettes, ones that were painfully recognizable to Hiccup.

"You are weighed by the memory of loving wife. Part of you still has not let her go. You are holding back, hesitating in living beyond survival and responsibility." The image changed, to one of two people a little further apart, in different stances, but still recognizable. "At the same time, another part of you has found love again. Yet, both parts cannot coexist. You are tearing your heart apart with this self-doubt, friend of dragons. It is not meant for such tugging."

Hiccup knew this. He knew he had to figure it out. "Tell me what I should do, Grandpabbie. Please."

The troll shook his head. "I'm sorry, young one. The matters of the heart are delicate and unique to each person. This is not an ailment with which I can aid."

"Please." Hiccup tried again. "There must be some advice that you can give me."

The troll's look was one of compassion as it reached up and clapped his shoulder. "Only the simplest, oldest, and yet most effective of advice."

"What is it?"

"Follow your heart, young one. Follow your heart."

Well, that was just unhelpful.

~H~

Disclaimer: Any characters, situations or places that you recognized are the trademarked property of Disney, Dreamworks, and their associates. I humbly use their amazing worlds to tell my story to no profit.

Acknowledgements: The Lady Sorrows had enough time to proofread about half of this chapter before mysteriously vanishing into the ether. Legend has it that she returned to the land of fabulous red-haired people, having fulfilled her purpose in this here Earth. Regardless, I am thankful for the time she did invest in me and my ramblings and will be forever thankful. Praise be.

Notes: Exciting news for me and any and all Fantasy fans! The thing that I mentioned working on some chapters ago is finally ready. It's called the DLP Anthology. You can find more details on my profile, but the gist of it is that I somehow managed to worm myself into a group of awesome people from the DLP forum who each submitted a short story of the High Fantasy genre. It's been published, and I would appreciate any and all support. All proceeds go the maintenance of the forum. If you like my writing and/or the High Fantasy genre, please check it out. The rest of the authors are all much more skilled than I am and the editor, Joe Ducie, is a successful professional writer and author of some of the best HP fanfiction available.

Further details on my profile.

* * *

><p>~H~

ACE 12

Act II

~H~

* * *

><p>Hiccup was rather relieved when he got off the horse. It wasn't really the poor beast's fault, Arendellian horses were very disciplined, he had to admit. Still, horses in general were, in his experience, skittish, nervous creatures, sharing all of the dragons' apprehension but none of their intelligence.<p>

And they couldn't fly.

Maybe he was unfair, he admitted to himself. Still, he surrendered the horse to the stable boy as soon as possible, his legs aching in places he wasn't used to. A horse saddle was much different than a dragon's, as was the riding position.

It'd taken them a bit longer to get back than they'd expected, to the point where they'd missed dinner. Anna and Kristoff had bid him goodnight after releasing the horses. Hiccup was very grateful that they hadn't asked a single question about his conversation with Grandpabbie. Perhaps it was not so surprising. He knew that Kristoff had been raised by the trolls, and Anna had explained to him that Grandpabbie had played a key role in her and Elsa's life. They would know that one's discussion with the elder troll was a deeply private

affair. Similarly, they had respected his pensive mood and stayed silent during the way back, leaving him to his thoughts.

He'd sought out Toothless immediately, finding the dragon lazing about on the balcony of his quarters. Surprisingly, he wasn't alone. Barf was lying on the balcony as well, his bigger frame barely fitting on the remaining space. Ruff was there, in civilian wear for once, idly scratching Barf under his chin, much to the scarred dragon's enjoyment.

She looked up as he entered, and waved in greeting. He waved back, and joined them on the balcony. She pointed at the broken door, leaning against the wall.

"I forgot to say it earlier, but nice job on that door."

"Don't look at me. It was Toothless' fault."

His dragon pulled himself out of his reverie long enough to garble something unintelligible, but clearly irritable.

"What?" Hiccup asked. "It was your fault."

Toothless did not grace him with a reply. Hiccup shook his head.

"Useless reptile."

"So, is it true?" Ruff asked.

"What is?"

"The trolls exist?"

He nodded, eliciting an impressed whistle from Ruff.

"So old legless was right all along?"

"Seems that way, though the socks business is still under question."

"And that troll thingy helped you?"

Hiccup grimaced, the elder's words of warning resounding in his head. Not to mention â€|

_ 'Follow your heart...' _

Cryptic, unhelpful old cobblestone.

"I suppose he did."

"Uh huh." She said, looking unconvinced but not pushing the issue, for which Hiccup felt grateful. "What's the plan, then? We going flying?"

"Yep, so go suit up."

"Fine. Meet you in ten."

Hiccup nodded, already pulling stuff that he would need out of his bags. Ruffnut left, and Barf jumped off the balcony before opening his wings and flapping away.

Toothless got to his feet, approaching Hiccup with a questioning rumble as he changed.

"Yes, bud, we're going flying."

It was simple matter, performed thousands of times before, to prepare his gear and Toothless'. It took him a few minutes to refit the leather appendages on his armor, but it wasn't hard. Soon, they were in the Courtyard where Ruff was waiting, already on Barf's saddle. She gave him a nod before securing her helmet on her head. After her slight whistle, the green dragon grunted before jumping high and flapping his wings powerfully, taking flight.

Hiccup noticed that he had a rather large audience today, larger than usual. Perhaps word of his intending show has spread?

As if in confirmation, Ernie broke out from the mass of people and approached him. After a short bow and greeting, the young man asked: "Is it true what they say? You intend to fly by yourself?"

Hiccup smirked. Is that what they were saying? Far be it for him to deny them.

He saw the royal sisters approach. His reply to Ernie was not lost to them.

"It will be like nothing you've ever seen, my friend."

The Queen was wearing a spectacular white dress. Her hair, braided in her usual way, was dusted with ice crystals. She gave him a small, lopsided smile. One he knew was genuine.

"Do try not to kill yourself."

Hiccup repressed a snort. "No promises."

Anna stood next to her sister, practically vibrating with excitement. One look at the princess and he didn't doubt that she would push him atop Toothless if it meant she'd get him in the air earlier.

"Alright, I'm going."

He climbed on Toothless, and the slight click of his prosthetic as it latched onto the mechanism was enough for Toothless to open his wings and shuffle his weight, coiling like a spring.

"Ernie, my ladies, you should probably stand back." Hiccup said, a touch theatrically, just before Toothless shot like crossbow bolt, straight upwards. Hiccup had just enough time to hear Anna's angry exclamation as the air pushed by Toothless' wings flapped at their dresses and hair. He couldn't hold back a chuckle.

He had warned them.

He and Toothless performed a few lazy spins as they ascended,

enjoying the feeling of being back in the air. They were joined seamlessly by Ruff and Barf. The two dragons banked around and began circling each other high above the courtyard.

They went through some of the more basic acrobatic drills, performing a mock fight between dragons for the sake of their audience, complete with low-powered fireballs which the dragons dodged in ever more spectacular ways. Hiccup grinned into the streaming wind as one of Toothless's daring dives brought them close enough to hear the gasps of the crowd. The dragons weren't immune to showing off either. He heard Ruff whoop in excitement as Barf followed them down. The Zippelback wasn't as agile as Toothless but he was still very capable. Barf was undoubtedly one of the most skilled dragons in Berk's possession, being a veteran and one of the very few survivors of the original crew.

Barf and Ruff showcased Barf's gas, with the Zippelback leaving a long trail that Ruff would ignite with her fire-breather to spectacular results.

After their mock-combat was over, it was time for what Hiccup had planned. Toothless and Barf leveled off, high above the clouds, and he did a final check-up of his gear. Everything being in order, he turned and gave a nod to Ruff. She shot him a grin, and then Barf broke formation, losing altitude quickly.

"You ready for this, bud?" Hiccup asked, patting Toothless' neck. The dragon's head turned almost completely to look at him, giving him a wide, toothless grin, tongue flapping against the air.

"Alright, let's do this."

At the confirmatory warble from the Night Fury, he clicked the mechanism, before pulling a small lever that locked the prosthetic tail fin in generic gliding shape. That done, he carefully stood on the saddle, balancing against the harsh winds, drawing deep breaths.

"Here goes."

With that, he jumped. He was suddenly no longer standing on Toothless, instead floating in the air, the momentum of his jump carrying him forward. He stared up, enjoying the few seconds of seeming weightlessness before gravity reassured itself and he suddenly found himself plummeting.

He stabilized, locking his limbs in place and turning his fall into a headfirst dive. He wondered as to the noise echoing around inside his helmet, before he realized it was his own excited screaming.

Toothless caught up to him, limbs and wings locked at his sides, enjoying the free fall as much as he did.

"Yeah!" Hiccup screamed, earning another toothless smile from his lifelong friend.

Together they fell, the bed of clouds approaching rapidly with each second that passed. They broke the surface of the clouds, the land below suddenly visible, though still very far away. The castle

positively gleamed in the evening sun, as did the fjord, providing one of the most amazing views Hiccup had ever seen.

"Three, two, one!" Hiccup counted down, before pulling a leather string with each hand. As he did, the leather additions to his suit deployed, catching the wind between his arms and his torso and halting his free fall, turning it into a steep glide. Beside him, Toothless had done the same, opening his wings and catching the wind, drifting next to him.

A quick, sharp tug at his waist and the spine-wing had been deployed, allowing him better directional control as he glided.

It also looks incredibly awesome, he would think to himself with glee.

Looking down, in the distance, he could see the castle, with nothing but a blur betraying the crowd in the Courtyard.

He'd shown them gliding. Now it was time to show them flight. Sort of.

"Now, Toothless!"

At his command, Toothless widened his wing-span slightly, lagging behind Hiccup. From there, he released a short fireball, which overtook Hiccup from below and exploded. Hiccup's suit caught the hot air currents, his limbs shook as he swooped upwards like a bird of prey, riding them over the last of the fireball and gaining altitude.

They repeated the process a few times, maintaining a level altitude rather than gliding downwards. It was working!

Hiccup looked down again, they had just about passed the castle, now flying directly over the fjord. A change of direction was in order.

Now, he could just angle himself and slowly but surely do a complete 180, but where would the fun be in that?

He chanced a look behind him and to the left. As expected, Ruffnut and Barf had fallen into formation next to Toothless. He nodded once, and received a similar nod from Ruff as she guided Barf in a reckless roll that took them below Toothless and to his right. With a brief surge of speed, Barf overtook first Toothless then Hiccup himself, widening the distance between them with powerful flaps of his wings. When sufficiently far away, Barf quickly reversed trajectory, now heading straight towards Hiccup.

Hiccup had a brief moment to consider what this must have looked like to the people below, before Toothless' fireball exploded below him, taking him higher. At that point, he reached the hot air from the nearly solid wall of fire that Barf and Ruffnut were producing, aimed steadily upwards, that sent him on a steep climb on the scalding air currents. Hiccup flew straight up. When he deemed his velocity sufficient, he gathered his arms closer to his sides, allowing the leather membranes to relax as he twisted.

His momentum carried him higher and he manipulated the air current

and the lax membranes to gyrate, spinning faster and faster around himself. At the apex of his climb, as he felt gravity regain its inevitable hold on him, he stopped spinning, now facing the direction they had come from. Toothless had also ridden Barf's wave of flame, completing a perfect half-loop and turn, once again positioning himself behind Hiccup as they resumed their flight.

Never in his wildest dreams would the Hiccup of five years ago have thought that such miracles were possible. The rush of his flight, the strain of keeping the apparatus together, it was all making his heartbeat race and his breathing labored and intense.

He decided to, as they say, up the ante. The next time he rode a heatwave he took the opportunity to spin a few times, before redeploying the membranes to steady himself. It put undue strain on the leather, but gods smite him if it didn't feel exhilarating. Spin by spin, flip by flip, his flight was bringing him above the castle, then over it once more.

The first sign of wrongness came from the familiar empty feeling in his stomach and the vague panic one experiences when falling. His vision was a blur as he fell, having suddenly lost control of his glide and plummeting through the air.

Had the gods decided to punish him for his hubris and had, in fact, smitten him out of the sky?

But no, his frantic attempts to regain control of his drop revealed the cause as he uselessly flapped his hands in order to deploy the membranes. The right one opened perfectly, but the left one had been torn completely from the pressure, thus breaking his gliding and causing his uncontrollable spinning as he fell.

The realization brought with it the rest of his senses, and he could suddenly hear Toothless' desperate bellows from high above him as the dragon no doubt tried to catch up.

Hiccup could see nothing, spinning and turning as he was due to his one functional membrane that had no counterbalance on his left side. His fall turned him this way and that, one second he could see the clear evening sky and the next the dark blue of the fjord below, along with the occasional glints from the castle and even what he assumed were the faraway snowy mountain-tops.

He did his best to curb his mounting panic. From what glimpses his spinning allowed him, the castle, the docks and the fjord were approaching rapidly. He'd already been falling for many seconds, much more than he felt comfortable with. He tried control his fall, doing his best to align his limbs so that he'd fall at a controlled pace. He cursed loudly when he was sent wildly spinning from the membrane again. There was no way he could retract it as it was, and the wild spinning meant that no matter how hard he tried to stick his hand to his side, the wind always caught on the leather and extended it.

His frantic attempts to control his fall were for the benefit of his savior. Catching a spinning person plummeting was much harder than a person in a controlled free-fall, he knew that well.

He recognized the distant crooning that reached his ears, even past the screeching of the winds inside his helmet. Toothless was too far

away to catch him. Hiccup's fall had been too abrupt for his gliding partner to follow immediately, and he could not utilize his legendary speed without full use of his tailfins.

That left only one other.

He pulled his dagger from its position by his chest with his left hand. It was hard, but he managed to bring the knife down on the membrane of his right arm, slicing it just enough and letting the wind do the rest. Not a second after he nicked it, the right membrane met the same fate as the left as the leather was split completely by the winds, and he was finally able to throw his hands out and begin controlling his fall, ceasing the stomach churning spins.

And not a moment too soon as he was yanked, rather painfully, out of his fall by something wrapping itself tightly around his torso. What little air he had was knocked out of him, and it took him a few moments to breathe and open his eyes again.

He recognized the green scales and wicked talons holding him. If he could, he would release a breath in relief. As it was, he did his best to resume breathing in a controlled manner.

A look down revealed the ground to be frightfully close. Ten, perhaps fifteen more seconds of free-fall and they'd have been gathering his remains from all over the valley.

Barf made no effort to slow down, even after catching him, as Ruffnut directed him in a sharp uptake from the mad dash to catch him, and the castle was getting further away again.

Hiccup was preparing to shout something when he was suddenly released. No, he'd been thrown! He had enough presence of mind to orient himself and land, just as he knew he would, safely on Toothless' saddle as the dragon passed by underneath him. He immediately locked his prosthetic in place and released the locking mechanism of the tailfin.

He calmed Toothless' anxious warbles by softly caressing the dragon's neck.

"Shhh, buddy. Its okay. I'm fine."

Toothless did not give up so easily, releasing a drawn-out whine and shaking his head wildly.

"I know bud, that was too close."

At that moment, Ruffnut and Barf fell in line next to them.

"Thanks." he called out.

Ruff grinned, though it looked a little strained. "Looks like you owe me. Again."

Hiccup scoffed. "I had it under control."

She barked out a laugh. "Of course, you were controllably falling to your death, all because you couldn't keep from showing off."

"Yes, well I shut up." Was his intelligent reply, eliciting another snort.

"Had enough?"

Much as he liked flying, perhaps he'd tried the patience of the gods enough for one day.

"Yeah."

"Good luck with those people."

Hiccup abruptly looked downwards, towards the Courtyard, still half-full of people that had watched his rather embarrassing fall. If his face wasn't already red from the exertion, it would probably be turning red right about now.

"I think I should probably just land somewhere else."

"The brave and mighty Wrath of Berk, fleeing from a crowd of foreigners? My, how the mighty have fallen."

Hiccup did not grace that with a reply. In cases such as these, discretion was the better part of valor. Probably.

He and Ruff split up, heading to their respective balconies and bringing themselves to the castle's level.

As soon as they landed on their balcony and Hiccup dismounted after removing his helmet he was beset by several hundred pounds of dragon and -more importantly- dragon slobber, as Toothless rather enthusiastically professed his joy at his survival.

"By Odin Toothless, quit it. This is the third time I'll have to scrub it this week." Hiccup protested, though his hands were busy scratching Toothless' head.

He'd just began inspecting the damage to the leather when the hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end. Every instinct he had screamed at him, warning him of possible danger to such a degree that he shivered and cast his eyes about, looking for the source of his discomfort as his fingers clenched around the hilt of his dagger.

He needn't have looked long, for the doors to his quarters were all but blasted open by a surge of frost. Upon seeing the Queen's murderous expression as she hurried inside, Hiccup surrendered himself to his fate, ignoring his instincts and releasing the dagger he'd instinctively raised, letting it clutter uselessly against the floor.

Outside the door Hiccup saw, briefly, the worried faces of the princess and Ernie, but a swift motion of the Queen's arm had the doors slamming shut as she all but stalked towards him.

He really had no idea what to do and his instinctive reaction, to backpedal away from the furious Queen, only worked until he bumped against his desk.

"Um I" he tried to speak, though no words in particular made it

out.

The Queen had reached him not stopping until she had entered his personal space. A gloved hand shot up and Hiccup felt a stinging pain on his cheek, along with the sudden realization that he was staring at his bed, to his right. He'd been slapped. Rather forcefully, at that.

He brought a hand to his stinging cheek, wincing as even that contact sparked another bit of pain.

"Ow. What the-"

"_What the hell was that?_" The Queen interrupted him, grabbing the front of his leather armor and pushing him against his desk. Even if Hiccup was almost a full head taller than her, that did not make her any less intimidating. "Is that your way of doing something crazy?"

"Errâ€|"

"Do you have any idea how that looked? How helpless I felt watching you fall to your death? I told you, you reckless idiot,_ I told you_. Try not to die, were these not my explicit instructions?"

The tiny smile that took over Hiccup's lips was painful. "I said no promises, remember?"

She grunted in frustration pushing him against the desk again with surprising strength as she rested her head against his chest, probably debating whether further physical violence was prudent or not. Hiccup attributed the slight shaking of her shoulders to her anger. But, perhaps ...

He brought his right hand up and, very carefully, caressed her cheek. Gently, he took hold of her chin and led her to look at him. He felt the sting of shame at seeing her watery eyes. He really hadn't considered what this must have looked like to her or the other locals, beyond the embarrassment of failure. Close calls were common for him, but this wasn't about him, and he wasn't in Berk anymore. Once again, he'd failed someone he cared about.

"I'm sorry I worried you." He said, doing his best to sound as sincere as he felt. "I'm fine, though. See? All here."

Her expression changed, several emotions passing beneath her eyes, too quickly to recognize.

"You really are an idiot."

"That's what I'm t-" He didn't finish his sentence, as the clenched fists on his chest suddenly pulled him down and the next thing he knew, Elsa had locked her lips with his in a kiss he could only describe as equal parts desire and anger.

He wasn't one to complain though.

After what felt like an hour but realistically mustn't have been more than a minute she released him, panting against his chest as both tried to regain their bearings.

"Butâ€|" Hiccup began, confused. "I thought you said-"

"I know what I said." She cut him off sharply, fingers once again gripping him in death-grip. Her shoulders shook once, twice. "I know what I said." She repeated. "I just-"

Rather than complete her sentence, she kissed him again. This time Hiccup was more prepared, though her aggressiveness and her apparent sense of urgency were still novel.

When they separated, neither spoke for a minute, digesting all that had happened.

"I'm sorry." Hiccup repeated.

"Don't ever do that to me again."

He tried to suppress a grimace, and for the most part succeeded. That was not something he could promise. "I'll try not to."

The silence was tense, as she continued to hold him by his armor and his hands were loosely around her sides.

All things considered, Hiccup felt like he'd gotten off rather easily. Which probably explained the idiocy that followed.

"You have to admit though," he said, "that was awesome."

He realized that it had been a mistake as soon as he saw the flash in her eyes and the squaring of her jaw. Him and his big mouth.

The next thing he knew, he was doubled over, kneeling on the ground as intense and blinding pain wracked his body, centered around his privates, courtesy of the Queen's knee. He sucked in a greedy breath as he grunted, doing his best not to pass out or sprawl on the floor. All he could see through watery eyes were Elsa's shoes, a sparkling purple pair.

"Was that â€|" He managed to hiss through his teeth as soon as he could breathe again, hands still clasped protectively over the injured region "really â€| necessary?"

"No." he heard her voice, surprisingly light considering her earlier anger. He saw her feet turn, before starting a leisure walk towards the double doors of his rooms.

"I just really, really wanted to." Were her parting words, before she left him alone in his misery.

Even as the intense waves of pain continued, Hiccup could not help the wry chuckle that escaped him, though it came out as more of a cough than a laugh.

He'd have to give this round to her.

Throughout all this, his partner had lounged on the balcony, content to simply watch the scene play out.

"Toothless," he called as he tried to drag himself to the bed, "a

little help?"

All he got in reply was an amused snort. Apparently, his traitor of a dragon thought he'd deserved it.

"Good-for-nothing lizard."

~H~

Within half an hour he'd felt well enough to get off the bed, though he did so gingerly. The Queen had a surprising aptitude for violence when she put her mind to it, it seemed. He must have really scared her if he'd pushed her to such lengths.

He'd seen to Toothless' dinner, and then had his own dinner with Ruffnut. He refused to tell his blonde friend what had happened, quite sure that he would never live it down. Instead he bored her with his ideas for possible safety mechanisms. Whatever he'd told Elsa, the fall had made him think. Perhaps a backup set of wings, or some kind of detachability that would allow mid-air replacements. Ruff for the most part wasn't listening to him. She'd brought Frot with her, the little Tiny Terror, and was preoccupied with feeding him scraps from their meal as they ate. Hiccup didn't mind, he'd only been thinking out loud anyway.

After their late dinner they had planned to just chill at one of the balconies for a while before separating for the night, Ruff carrying a tired Frot in her arms. As they were making their way to the staircase, aiming to go higher, they crossed paths with a figure steadily descending the steps.

The Commander General, dressed in a heavy coat lined with fur, gave them a polite, if brief, nod and greeting before continuing on his way. The vikings responded in kind as they began their ascension.

Hiccup cast a glance behind him, noting the general turning into the hallway that would lead him to the castle entrance, the Courtyard, and eventually out of the castle proper. He frowned, several thoughts crossing his mind before he made a split-second decision.

"Ruff, you go on ahead, I have something to do."

"Hm?" She said, turning to look at him from a few steps higher when she realized he had stopped. "What's this now?"

"Nothing, just â€| call it a hunch. I'll see you tomorrow."

She shook her head. "Whatever, I don't wanna know. You and your hunches always get us in trouble."

"Because you have a difficult time getting in trouble by yourself?"

"Hey, screw you." She called behind her back as she continued her way up the stairs.

On second thought â€| "Hold on!" He called. She paused again arching an eyebrow at him.

"Send me Frot." Hiccup asked.

Ruff didn't question him, she just lightly shook Frot out of his digestive stupor. When the Tiny Terror looked at her inquisitively she nodded towards Hiccup and clicked her tongue. Getting the hint, Frot unfurled his tiny wings and flapped, landing on Hiccup's outstretched hands.

"I'd better get him back." Ruff warned.

"Sure."

Hiccup went down the stairs, following the Commander General's path, as Ruff went up the staircase and vanished around a corner. The older man had quite the head start and if his hurried steps were any indication, Hiccup would have had a hard time catching up and finding him, especially without sunlight. However...

"Hey boy, can you help me with something?" Hiccup asked the Terror while scratching him under the chin, much to the dragon's enjoyment. Putty in his hands, he was not surprised at all to hear the approving growl from the small creature.

"Remember the guy who just passed us? Can you get his scent?"

Frot shook his head, trying to focus his senses, and let out a frustrated whine.

"I know there are dozens of scents buddy, but just focus on the strongest one besides mine and Ruff's. The most recent. He went that way." He said, pointing down the hallway. Frot focused for a few seconds, nostrils flaring and tongue tasting the air rapidly. He suddenly let out a triumphant shriek and extended his neck fully towards the hallway.

"Good boy. Let's follow him."

Hiccup followed Frot's nose as the Terror lead him through the hallways, the inner gates, the Courtyard, and eventually the castle perimeter gates themselves. Technically the castle was closed at this time of night, but Hiccup -and the Commander General- was one of the few people allowed to use one of the smaller, side-entrances, carefully hidden next to the gates.

Arendelle at this hour of day was quiet, but not completely empty. Hiccup, thankful for the local coat that he'd chosen to wear, pulled the hood over his head and hid Frot inside it and over his stomach. He bent at the waist, so that the slouching and his hands were enough to hide Frot's head, which was protruding from his coat. Adding a small limp to his step ensured that no one would recognize him, the coat was long enough to cover most of his prosthetic from view.

Frot led him through Arendelle's main district, then left at an intersection that lead to one of the lesser merchant areas, closer to the docks. After about ten minutes of navigations, Frot's signals were becoming and more frantic. They were close.

"You need to be quiet now, boy." Hiccup cautioned.

When Frot tensed, approaching a corner, Hiccup paused. Very

carefully, he glanced around the corner at the small alley. There was the Commander General, deep in discussion with another person. Hiccup recognized the man from the meeting they'd had ¯ earlier that day? It seemed far longer, so much had happened today.

Vren, was it? Protector Divisive, or something like that? Yes, that was the guy.

Hiccup could not hear what they were saying, and he could not approach any closer, either. The alley was too empty, they would notice him the moment he turned the corner. From the looks of things, the Commander was issuing orders, as the Protector Divisive only seemed to be paying attention and nodding, occasionally giving short replies. After five minutes they seemed to have ended their Commander turned and headed towards Hiccup's side of the alley. Hiccup quickly turned the other way and assumed a very slow walk as he slouched, doing his best imitation of an old man. The Commander General, with his brisk walk, caught up to him half a minute later and passed him by, not giving him a single look. Hiccup stopped and watched the man leave, heading down the district in the direction of the castle.

The Protector Divisive, however ¯

"Follow the other guy, Frot." Hiccup instructed as he looked down the alley again. It was empty, so he hurried to cross it and look at the road on the other side. He saw no sign of him, so he waited for the Terror to pick up the scent.

A slight nudge and he was walking down the left, following the road toward the docks. In the distance, he could see the towering masts of Arendelle's majestic trade ships. He had no time to daydream about them, because Frot was leading further away from the castle, to the edges of Arendelle. The gigantic trade ships were on richer docks, around the castle itself. However, the further one walked from the castle, the bigger variety of ships he would see. The harbor continued, stretching in the distance, boats of all shapes and sizes roped on its docks.

And suddenly Hiccup could see his guy, several dockyards ahead, and he slowed to a crawl, before coming to a stop in front of a fish stall, long since closed. His conspicuous appearance meant that he didn't draw the attention of the Protector Divisive, or the shady guys he was talking with.

Hiccup observed them for a few minutes. The people the Divisive was talking to were mostly covered, their clothes in a state between rags and respectable. Hiccup did not dare approach further.

Eventually, the Divisive and the men all boarded the docked boat and headed inside in. Hiccup could not recognize the boat beyond the fact that it wasn't Arendellian and not particularly big. Single mast, no flags, inconspicuous grey sails. He was itching to get closer, to perhaps board the boat and get a glimpse of what the Divisive and the men were doing or discussing, but he did not risk it.

Eventually, he could wait for the man no longer. He wanted to stay and figure out more, but he knew that if he stayed any longer he'd be missed at the castle, and that was one conversation he did not look forward to. He made a mental note of the number carved into the wharf in front of the ship. It would have had to register with the

dockmaster to moor up here. Unfortunately, that was all he could do at the moment. Grudgingly, he took the path back to the gates.

He fed the guards some story about getting lost, and they all had a hearty laugh about it as they let him in.

He considered what it could all mean as he bathed and prepared for bed. Clearly, the General and the Divisive were up to something, something that they felt had to be done in the secrecy of night and away from the castle's view. Something that had to do with those men on the ship. Their skin had seemed darker to Hiccup, but it had been dark outside and with how they had been covering their heads he couldn't be sure.

Toothless was asleep on the balcony, no doubt happily digesting his dinner. Hiccup himself did not put off sleep any longer, for tomorrow would no doubt be a trying day, even if all went according to plan.

Blizzards raged in his dreams that night.

~H~

Morning found him in jitters. He double checked his clothes and equipment, the recent failure making him mindful of further potential troubles.

Breakfast was had in uncomfortable silence, as the breakfast table was no place to discuss specifics of their undertaking, yet that was all that was on their minds. Well, most of it. Hiccup was still unsure on what to think of his last run-in with the Queen, never mind if he should bring it up and what to say about it, if so.

He spent the better part of the morning until noon placating Toothless. The dragon was unhappy about being left behind and very vocal about his disapproval. It took a lot of smooth talking from Hiccup to settle his agitated friend.

When it was time, Ruffnut came to his quarters, wearing her light leather armor and her double-bladed axe resting on her back. She gave him a once-over upon entry.

"You ready?" She asked.

Hiccup gave a solemn nod. No doubt battle would be joined today. He had fought no small amount of battles in his short life, yet he did not feel eagerness at the prospect of more bloodshed.

Smoker was resting at his side, and his dagger was hidden beneath the reddish sash around his waist. His bow he deemed too cumbersome for urban skirmishes.

They left Toothless and Barf on the gardens and the two dragons, while clearly unhappy, took courage from each other and refrained from making a scene.

In the courtyard they met the Queen, her entourage, and several curious people. No doubt the Vikings' visit to Varnas had been well talked about, word spreading through the Queen's agents to notify the enemy.

A small host, no more than five men, were waiting for them, with two extra horses. No doubt a misleading number of guards, to present a more juicy target.

He had time to exchange a few words with the Queen, who approached him, giving an uncomfortable look at his sword and Ruff's axe.

"If all goes well, you will not be near the fighting."

"If all goes well." Hiccup repeated, implication clear on his tone. The Queen frowned.

"Promise me you will stay away."

He shook his head, letting out a long breath. How to put it ... "Trust me in this, if nothing else."

She seemed to consider his words, and in the end did not say whatever it was on the tip of her tongue. Hiccup could almost see the resignation in her eyes as she changed the topic.

"I apologize... for my conduct yesterday. It was not proper."

Hiccup almost chuckled, and shook his head. No, it was too late to go back to playing royals now.

"You're not sorry." He accused with mirth.

At this, the ghost of a smile appeared on her lips, until now pressed into an almost angry line.

"I did not say that I was." She noted. "Just that I apologize."

"Apology accepted, in that case. I do not doubt that I deserved it."

"The apology, or the action that warranted one?"

Unfortunately, their time was up, as he was now the sole reason they had not departed yet. Even Ruff was mounted and watching the exchange with what he could express only as glee.

The Queen noticed this as well.

"We will speak further upon your return." She said. The 'Come back' command was left unsaid, but Hiccup heard it, all the same. For this being her plan, the Queen seemed rather worried. Hiccup himself did not much like what they were about to do, either.

Or maybe it was him she did not trust to go along with the plan? Regardless.

"Do me a favor." He asked, and she tilted her head, curious.

"Name it."

Hiccup gave her a brief description of the ship he'd watched last

night, and the number on it.

"Would you look into it? Discreetly."

"What is this about?"

"Call it a hunch. Could be important, could be nothing."

Her brow was furrowed rather cutely in confusion, clearly not understanding his motives, but she nodded nonetheless.

"I will see what I can find."

"Thank you."

With that and a final bow of the head, he -carefully- mounted his horse and nodded to the guards. They left the castle, walking through the city in a slow pace until they had cleared it. After that, on the open path, the horses opened their strides, going a little faster but still just travelling speed.

Ruff rode beside him, two of the guards in front and one acting as the rear guard. Varnas was, as promised, not too far away, yet far away from the capital and Elsa's seat of power for the enemy to, presumably, feel safe in their movements.

They stopped on occasion, seeking the shade of the roadside trees to snack upon some provisions and let the horses rest, but no more than twice did they stop.

Several hours into their journey, Ruffnut nudged him. "Why the long face?"

Indeed, Hiccup had a perpetually dark look on his face. He made an effort to relax, but found that he couldn't. He turned to face Ruffnut.

"I'm not sure, I just have a bad feeling."

"This is a trap that we're walking into." She pointed out.

"I know. All the same, keep your eyes open. I don't like this."

"Kay, chief." Despite the nonchalance of her tone, Hiccup could make out the stiffening of her jaw and the clenching of her fists. Ruff was as on edge as he himself was.

Not many words were exchanged for the rest of their journey. Varnas came into view eventually, as they circled a hill. It was, surprisingly, larger than Arendelle herself. It lacked a castle, or any sizable buildings, but the sheer space the town covered was more than the capital. When asked, the guards replied that Varnas was a major population center and housed a good percentage of Arendelle's population, but lacked a port, for which merchants had to travel all the way to the capital.

As they approached, Hiccup and Ruff were let in on the details of the plan. Namely, the route that they were expected to follow, up to the point of the switch, where they would then go to hide, and the route

their doubles would follow were laid out to them. They were to wait in a building nearby that had been cleared, and more loyal soldiers of Arendelle waited to guard them.

To his dismay, Hiccup had neither the time nor -surprisingly- the interest to take in Varnas' architecture or people, something he would otherwise love to do. His mind was too focused on the task ahead, so he barely took note of when they entered the town perimeter. No fortifications of any kind, the only thing to mark entrance into the town were the houses themselves.

Unlike with Arendelle they did not draw attention, for Varnas at this time of day was filled to the brim with people milling around, and even their weird attire, weaponry or security detail were not enough to draw anything beyond a second glance.

Soon they had reached deep within the city, and abandoned their horses on what seemed to be a barracks before continuing on foot. For several minutes they walked, mingling with the busy traffic, the vikings pretending innocent interest in their surroundings.

At a subtle nod from the head guard, Hiccup understood that it was time to split up. He recognized the place they were, a square with a statue of one of Elsa's ancestors, and knew where they were supposed to go from there. He had a loud discussion with the guard about how the soldiers would be waiting for them at the barracks and that they could go back there whenever they were done having a look around.

Hiccup and Ruffnut continued on alone, taking the predetermined route that would take them, seemingly by accident, away from the center of the city and closer to the outskirts, where roads were smaller, buildings more cramped together and people sparse. If an ambush was to be made, he had been told, that was where it would be.

His eyes flit all over the place, searching for signs of trackers or ill intent. Several times he caught the glimmer of weapons among folds of clothing, but knew not if these were the enemy, disguised Arendellian soldiers, or simply armed civilians. He had the feeling that he was being watched, an uneasy thing like when one might put his shirt backwards and be uncomfortable until he fixes it. Still, he did not know if that could be attributed simply to the disguised soldiers he'd been assured were around.

He kept up a stream of small talk with Ruff, to cover the silence and to keep up appearances of taking a casual stroll. She responded, but by her gruff and short replies her nerves showed through.

Soon, they reached a small alley between two buildings that had its two entrances covered by wooden planks. They'd been told that the switch was to take place there, and that they would be escorted to their hiding place from a hidden door in the left building.

Opening the flimsy wooden door, Hiccup confirmed that they had come to the right place. Within the, admittedly tight, confines of the dark alley were four people. Two of them wore civilian clothes but carried wicked looking swords, and the other two were clearly meant to be their doubles.

Ruff let out low whistle. "Don't you look fine, girl?"

Hiccup ignored his subordinate and inspected his double carefully, fighting down the urge to widen his eyes in surprise. In the lighting of the alley, the man standing in front of him looked exactly like him, down to his very clothes and gear.

He supposed that the gear would have been easy enough to replicate, though he didn't know when they'd had enough time to examine it, but the very characteristic hair would have been decidedly less so. Still, Ernie had told him that it was not rare in Arendelle for people to wear what he called 'wigs', in essence fake hair. Either this was such a wig, or this man had been chosen for the close resemblance of his hair style to his own.

Similarly, the angry scar running down his face must have been painted on, considering the fact that it was an exact replica of the one that marred his own face.

Like his own, Ruffnut's double had the exact same hairstyle, and her armor was nearly identical. Not perfect, but he doubted any enemies would spot the subtle differences. It was quite impressive to find a woman that could so closely pass as Ruffnut in the short time she had been here.

When they approached them, Hiccup noticed that, despite their work, their faces could not be copied completely, despite what must have been a lot of effort. Still, they looked similar enough to pass muster from a cursory look, and the rest of their appearance would be enough to convince any watches on the other end of the alley that it was, in fact, the vikings that walked out.

"Chief Haddock, this way." One of the two soldiers whispered to him, holding a tiny door open that lead to the darkness inside the building. "Quickly."

The doubles gave them a nod before turning, no doubt in order to walk to the other end of the alley and continue on the planned course.

Hiccup put a firm hand on his double's shoulder, halting him before he took a step.

"Stop." He ordered. "There's been a change of plans."

All four of them turned to look at him, looks of confusion on their faces.

"Sir?" Ruffnut's double asked.

Hiccup jerked his head towards the hidden door. "You go with them to the hiding place. We'll proceed as planned and meet you there when it's done."

Hiccup could see the frustration on their faces as soon as they understood what he was saying.

"But chief, our orders-"

"I don't give a dragon's claw about your orders." Hiccup cut him off, mindful not to raise his voice. "No one risks their life in my place."

Now get out of our way, you're wasting time."

And it was true, they could not stay here in the alley and argue for long. Any more tarrying, and any observers would surely know something was up.

The soldiers knew this, too, and despite their apparent discomfort wisely chose not to argue with him, instead giving him grim nods.

"Give them hell, sir."

Hiccup smiled.

The four of them entered the building through the hidden entrance at the same time he and Ruff walked to the other end of the alley. Exiting through the opposite wooden doorway, they continued their seemingly random stroll through the seedier part of the city, though Hiccup's fingers itched to close around his dagger.

He kept getting goosebumps, and while they were more than likely to be attributed to his nerves, his gut told him that he was being watched. He kept glancing discreetly at the few people, poor people, dressed in battered clothes, that they passed, but they didn't seem to notice them or were very good at hiding it.

The two of them kept up a steady stream of mindless banter, in part to keep up appearances and in part to ground themselves.

That is what they were doing when they entered a surprisingly large space between three buildings, near the end of the route their doubles were supposed to have taken. While the roads themselves were tight, there was a cart left against one of the building walls. Around it, several men were gathered, arguing over its contents.

Hiccup halted, for after a second's hesitation he was sure. The eyes of three of the four men were undoubtedly set on the two of them, despite their conversation and on one of the side buildings a door was creaking open.

He heard Ruffnut curse as she turned, unhooking her axe with deft movements, and a quick look verified that two people had blocked the way they had come and were slowly advancing on them.

He drew Smoker.

Aware now that they had been noticed, the men abandoned all pretense and drew weapons from beneath the cart's covering, as at the same time more men streamed out of the now open door.

The trap had been sprung.

~H~

From the get-go, Hiccup understood that they were fucked. There was no way the two of them, skilled though they may be, could take on a group as large as this in such tight confines.

He counted nine enemies, but more could be coming out of the door, of

which he lost line of sight as he and Ruffnut fell back into the alley.

Therein lay the key to their survival, taking control of the alley from which they came. That alley, barely fitting two people side by side while they walked, would mean that for all intents and purposes he and Ruff could each hold one direction and only face one opponent at a time. It was their only hope to stay alive long enough for the Arendellian reinforcements to reach them. Hiccup wasn't certain how far away they were, or how quickly they would notice the vikings' predicament. All he could do now was send a silent prayer to the gods and focus on staying alive.

Ruffnut rushed at the two men advancing on them, letting out a loud war cry as she swung her axe for momentum. Hiccup lost sight of her as he followed her inside the alley, backpedaling quickly.

The first man reached him a few seconds later, and Hiccup could tell from the cocky smirk on his face and the wide swing of his sword that he was being underestimated. All the better, he parried the strike high, occupying the man's sword with Smoker while his left foot shot up and kicked him hard in the groin. The man collapsed, reflexively letting go of the sword as he fell to his knees, a groan beginning to leave his lips.

Hiccup wasted no time and brought down Smoker as hard as he could, lodging it in the space between the neck and the shoulder. The man stared dumbly at him for a second, a hand reaching for the sword before Hiccup kicked him in the face, hard. Smoker dislodged and the man fell to the ground, not to rise again.

Now wary from their comrade's quick death, the others thought twice about rushing Hiccup. The second man, just a bit shorter than Hiccup, with rugged features and what appeared to be chain-mail beneath his clothes, squared his shoulders and approached him carefully, his comrades just far enough behind him to not be hit by any stray swings.

The clamor of Ruffnut's fight with the two men was suddenly replaced by a pained yell, followed by loud curses. Hiccup almost turned to look, concern for his friend overriding his common sense for a half-second.

That hesitation cost him, as his opponent chose that moment to launch his first strike, a stab that almost skewered him completely. As it was, Hiccup barely managed to turn the tip of the enemy's weapon to the side with his own, but his awkward movement had left him to receive a vicious punch to the face. While normally such a hit would disorient him, the rush of battle made it so that he barely felt it, though he did feel his lip splitting.

There was no time to worry about it though, as his adversary tried to use his superior bulk to shove Hiccup, in order to imbalance or even topple him.

Hiccup went with the movement, taking a step back and throwing the opponent's arm off him, Smoker being a bit too heavy to bring to bear so quickly and in so close range. Still, he took advantage of his height and, when the enemy blocked his follow-up swing and parried his sword to the left, gave him as strong a headbutt as he could. His

ears were ringing after the collision with the man's brow, but he had it much better than his opponent who gasped and took a step back, disoriented.

Hiccup took this opportunity to sink Smoker into the man's chest, right below the neck where the chain-mail ended, and then quickly recover it as he fell backwards, dead.

He quickly raised his eyes to look at the enemies still gathered in front of him when he saw the last thing he wanted to see in such a close combat engagement, held in the hands of the man behind the two immediately closest to him.

A gods-damned crossbow.

He tried to dodge, but he wasn't fast enough. As it was, the bolt lodged itself into his left shoulder rather than pierce his chest.

Hiccup let out a cry of pain as he was jerked backwards by the force of the bolt, Smoker falling from limp fingers as he stumbled.

He slipped on something wet and completely lost his balance, crashing into the ground painfully on his back.

Immediately they tried to capitalize on his fallen state, and the next two enemies moved forward to finish him off. One of them wielded a wooden spear, effective, however crude, and tried to stab at Hiccup with it.

Hiccup had enough presence of mind to push the spear to the left as it came down, using his greaves of hardened leather. His foot shot up and tripped the second person, buying him a few more seconds as the man's remaining leg slipped on what Hiccup now knew was blood from his first two kills.

With a mighty effort that sent fire coursing through his veins, Hiccup used his left, injured arm to clutch at the spear and pull, bringing its wielded closer. A wooden spear being much shorter than a halberd, the man was close enough for Hiccup's right hand, which had just retrieved his dagger from his sash in a smooth motion, to swipe at.

The man let go of the spear as he brought both hands to clutch at his neck, now completely torn open and gushing blood. He was pushed aside by the second man, who had regained his feet with an angry snarl and was hefting a rather wicked looking mace.

Behind him, Hiccup could see the crossbowman reloading his weapon and the remaining enemies surging closer, obviously wanting to take advantage of his unfortunate position.

The man's mace was blocked just in time by Ruffnut's axe, who suddenly entered Hiccup's field of vision. Presumably she had managed to kill her two opponents, though she had a nasty cut on her side, her leather and fur armor having been torn open, and one of her eyes was closed by the stream of blood falling down her brow. Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, she looked just as fierce as she always was, if not more, as she snarled at the man and threw herself at him.

Hiccup felt a wave of gratitude for his friend as he struggled to regain his feet with the space she bought him, but knew it would be for naught. There were still many men attacking them, and even if they turned to the now open entrance to the alley and started running they would not go far, in their state. To top it all off, the crossbowman had finished reloading and was about to take aim.

Or he would have, if his face hadn't suddenly contorted into a mask of pain, before dropping forward, crossbow slipping from his hands. Hiccup saw two bolts sticking out of the man's back.

"Chief Haddock!"

The angry cry came from the other side, from the clearing between buildings that held the cart and from which they'd fled. Hiccup saw, behind the enemies, soldiers of Arendelle rushing at them, two of which were busy reloading their crossbows.

Relief flooded through his mind. Help had arrived!

With a triumphant cry, Ruffnut used her enemy's distraction at the sudden turn of events to toss his mace from his hand and sink her axe sideways in his chest. At the same time, the Arendellians smashed into the would-be ambushers with all the force of an avalanche.

Hiccup watched the short battle unfold, resting his weight against the wall, left hand limply holding his dagger while his right clutched at his shoulder, not daring to pull the bolt out just yet.

With surprise and numbers on their side, it was not long before all the enemies lay on the ground, dead or dying.

The soldiers and Ruff, who had helped mop up the rest of the enemies, approached him. A soldier was limping and another was being supported by two of his comrades in order to stand, but the Arendellians had otherwise suffered no casualties.

His friend was immediately at his side, passing him Smoker, which she had retrieved, and curling an arm around the side of his uninjured arm to help him stand. Hiccup ignored her own hiss of pain as she put strain on her own, injured side. She would have to tend to it quickly, otherwise the bleeding, slow but steady, would become dangerous.

"Chief Haddock, are you alright?" The lead soldier asked when they reached and surrounded him.

"I'll live." Hiccup said with a grimace. He testily tugged at the bolt lodged on his shoulder, and barely managed to contain a loud cry of pain at the sudden surge of fire all over his left side as his vision blacked out for a second.

"We need to reach the safehouse." The captain said. "We can get you treated there."

Hiccup nodded and, with Ruff's only slightly unnecessary help, let go of the wall. He looked at the carnage around him. Ten bodies lay on

the ground, in various states ranging from dead to dying. While the confrontation itself had gone worse than he'd have liked, the numbers went better than he expected. Just ten men? He had expected ~~more~~.

Hiccup wasn't sure what brought about this uneasy feeling. Perhaps it was just the intense pain he was in, but he didn't like this. Not at all. They had survived and thwarted the ambush, but he still had a bad feeling. This looked, bolt in the shoulder notwithstanding, far too easy.

"Let's get out of here."

Despite the size of their group, reaching almost a dozen people, they tried to be quiet as they left the alley and made way to the safehouse. Hiccup and Ruff were in the middle, along with the two men carrying the injured one, and the others were fanned out around them, with the two crossbowmen having their weapons ready. They avoided the main roads, sticking to the less populated areas. Few people were still out and about, and they gave them weird looks but did not bother what was obviously a contingent of Arendellian soldiers.

The safehouse was in a nondescript building, nestled among other, exactly identical ones. It was closer to the center of the city than Hiccup would have thought, but he did not dwell on strategic criticism overmuch.

The soldiers took them to the building's side, which held a small, walled off alley. From there, they moved a wooden crate and opened the newly revealed hatch.

"Inside." The captain urged him to go first, gesturing to dark steps that lead below. Hiccup nodded and entered the hatch, Ruffnut keeping him steady as he descended the precarious steps, the captain himself right behind them.

The basement was dark, and his eyes took a while to adjust. It seemed that, from the seedy alley, they had stepped into a fully equipped armory. Racks lined the walls with enough weapons to supply a small garrison. Distributed around the room were also crates and barrels, no doubt filled with provisions.

The captain retrieved a torch from a wall and lit it with a flint, before pointing at a door.

"Through there." He said. "We can get someone to treat you."

With that he opened the door and the three of them walked in, the rest of the soldiers following behind them.

It wasn't long after entering the room that the single torch's light revealed more of the room.

Hiccup's eyes widened when he noticed the state of his surroundings.

By the gods

"What in Odin's name happened here?" Ruffnut asked, echoing his thoughts. The captain and the soldiers, for their part, offered no

reply, speechlessly taking in the carnage around them.

For carnage it was. Bodies littered the floor, all in various states of injury, all of them doubtlessly dead. Tables and chairs were upturned, plates of food discarded on the floor, itself covered in blood almost in its entirety.

Hiccup saw the two soldiers chosen as their doubles, still, for the most part, in their disguises. Their bodies were lying next to each other in the far corner of the room, next to an upturned wooden bench. Crossbow bolts were sticking out of their bodies, as well as the bodies of many of the dead guards inside the safehouse. The man actually had very short, sandy blonde hair. His face, now bloodied and locked in a perpetual mask of agony, looked surprisingly young.

This wasn't right. This wasn't supposed to happen.

The safehouse had been compromised.

"We need to move." Hiccup said. "Now."

~H~

13. Hiccup 5, Act III

Note: My judgment of wordcount has, once again, failed me. There will be another, quicker, smaller, Hiccup chapter to wrap up his plotline before the final Elsa chapter and the epilogue.

This has not been proofread at all, so there are bound to be tons of mistakes. Bear with me.

* * *

><p>~H~

**A Chance Encounter **

Hiccup 5

Act III

~H~

* * *

><p>The escape from the compromised safehouse was frantic. As quickly as they could, the two vikings and the Arendellian soldiers vacated the blood-soaked basement and made a mad dash towards the main road of Varnas, their goal being the barracks of the city garrison.<p>

There was no point in stealth anymore. The mission was already busted. All that remained was that they make sure everyone else made it to safety.

The two vikings and the injured soldier were in the middle of the tight-knit circle of Arendellians, all going as fast they could while

still maintaining a vigilant eye around them, weapons drawn and poised. They ignored the civilians who stumbled out of their way, no doubt startled at their bloody appearance and naked weapons.

It seemed like it took hours for them to reach the barracks. Hiccup's shoulder was throbbing painfully, and he was beginning to lose feeling in his left arm. Any attempt to move it resulted in surges of pain, so he simply let it hang on its makeshift sling, haphazardly made out of some torn cloth from his sleeve.

Perhaps more worryingly, the red patch on Ruffnut's side was growing steadily wider, and her gait had gained a wobbly quality that was quite uncharacteristic of her. She needed to be treated, and quickly.

They made it to the main road without trouble, though everyone was jumping at shadows and the smallest of noises. Not too far from the barracks itself, a small contingent of soldiers rushed out and headed towards them.

In a blur they were herded inside while fresh guards were dispatched to comb the surrounding streets, looking for any hostiles.

Hiccup and Ruffnut were guided deeper into the building, into what must have been the infirmary. He was separated from Ruffnut as she was rushed to a different room, followed by a gaggle of worried healers who all tried to speak at once. He was given a full glass of something alcoholic which he just downed with his good hand, not even pausing to take in the taste or the sting on his throat. Then, he was made to bite into a block of wood, and he did so as hard as he could, knowing what was to follow.

He almost passed out from the pain as the metallic bolt was pulled out of his shoulder in one smooth move. When he was sure he wouldn't bite his tongue he spat the wood out and started cursing, unsure of what exactly he was saying but content enough to just repeat Gobber's cusses from whenever the blacksmith would hurt himself in the forge.

He barely noticed the healer quickly and efficiently clean his wound, stitch it shut and bind it. He was given a proper sling for it, too. Still a little wobbly from the alcohol but thankful for its pain-numbing qualities, he was told by the healer that he would be fine and that he should just rest now.

"How's Ruffnut?" He asked.

The healer didn't know, but he left the room to find out and came back a minute later to tell him that she was still in surgery but expected to not have any problems. Apparently her wound was deeper and wider than it appeared, but she hadn't lost too much blood yet.

Hiccup let out a sigh of relief, thankful that his friend would be fine. He attempted to take a nap, but the throbbing pain in his arm did not let him. Instead, he tried to relax, clear his thoughts, and think things through. The pain and the alcohol were making his mind sluggish, but several things were clear.

They'd been betrayed. The enemy was aware of their plan to such a

degree that they even knew about the switch. That much was obvious now. It made sense, in hindsight. He'd been surprised that more men had not been sent to the ambush, but they had just been a distraction, meant to keep the Arendellians busy while the real strike occurred in the safehouse.

Hiccup's stomach twisted with guilt at the realization that it was nothing but his insistence on the switch that had saved his life - and condemned the lives of their doubles. His intentions had been honest; he never would have allowed someone else to fight and possibly die in his place. And yet, directly because of his actions, people had died in his place.

Of course he knew there was nothing he could have done to save them. There was no way to know their plan had been leaked, otherwise he never would have let the doubles die. It was by pure, dumb luck that he and Ruff were alive right now instead of them.

The young man's blood-stained face would not fade from his vision.

He resolved to learn their names at the first opportunity.

He was shaken awake some time later. Startled, he tried to get up only to put strain on his tied hand, forcing him to hiss in pain.

"Easy." The man who woke him told him.

Hiccup looked around, noting the low visibility. He'd actually fallen asleep, and for longer than he'd expected.

"What time is it?"

"Late."

He nodded. "Any word on Ruffnut?"

"She's expected to make a full recovery as long as she doesn't strain her wound. She should be well enough for the trip back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

The Arendellian gave him a nod. "It is too late to ride to Arendelle now. A messenger was dispatched to the Queen some hours ago."

His uncomfortable sleep had made him ache all over, but some squirming reminded him that he had bigger things to worry about. Looking down at his injured hand, he noted that someone had taken the time while he was asleep to bind his arm more securely and even fold his - newly cleaned - clothes around it.

He was soon brought some food for a late dinner. Despite being assured that it was standard barracks fare, Hiccup was still impressed by the quality of the meal. After that, he gingerly got up from the bed and out of the room. Ruffnut's room was just two doors down from his, and there was a guard outside her door that gave him a nod and let him pass, opening the door for him.

Ruffnut's room was much like his own, spartan but functional, lacking in windows. Ruff herself was still in bed, though she was using a number of pillows to prop herself up against the headboard. She turned towards him as soon as he entered, and her face broke into a toothy grin.

"Hey."

"Hey, yourself."

"You look like shit."

He couldn't help the dry chuckle that escaped him.

"That's rich, coming from you."

Ruffnut's armor had been carefully stacked on a table nearby, and she was now wearing a simple white gown and many, many bandages. Her entire torso was bandaged up, he could see, and she was also wrapped up to her elbows. The bandages on her injured side had dark red spots here and there, but her wound seemed to be closed tight.

"Still prettier than you are, mister tall and lanky."

"No arguments there." He grunted as dragged a chair to her bedside and gingerly lowered himself on it.

Her smile slowly faded away as she watched him, and his own good mood at seeing her alright vanished.

Eventually, she spoke. "Did you figure out what happened?"

"Not much to figure out," he admitted. "We got played. They knew about the switch, or they were planning a hit on the safehouse regardless. That seems unlikely, though. I was told there were more around the city, but only this one got hit as far I know."

Ruff grimaced. "We â€‘| really fucked up, didn't we?"

The image of the young blond man, laying in a pool of his own blood wearing Hiccup's armor passed through his mind.

"Yeah."

They were silent for a few moments longer, before Ruff let out a bitter chuckle.

"You know what's funny?" She asked him. Hiccup did not answer. "For the minute or so we stayed in that basement, one thing stuck out to me. You remember the girl they used as my double? Well, as she lay there, her hand was in a weird position. Not in an angle you'd expect a dying person to be. She was actually reaching out for your double. Her eyes, too, were locked on him."

She chuckled once again. Hiccup knew she found nothing of this funny, but Ruff was the kind of person who chose laughter over tears whenever she could.

"What do you suppose they were, that her final thoughts would be of him?" She asked, again not waiting for him to say anything. "Lovers?

“Siblings? Friends?”

They were vikings. Death was not foreign to them. They had lost much, the both of them, over the years. They had caused and witnessed countless deaths in their relatively short but eventful lives.

Hiccup supposed that this was bound to hit them a bit harder than usual. Their deaths were unexpected. Sudden. They had not died in the glory of combat, able to meet their ancestors with heads held high. They had been cowardly cut down from afar in a surprise attack, while their guard was down. There was no honor to be found in such a death.

Perhaps what made this case cut deeper was the fact that what brought about their deaths was their efforts to prevent this exact outcome. Hiccup knew there was point in blaming themselves. Doubtlessly Ruff did, too. He also knew that for a little while at least, that would be impossible.

He scooted his chair closer to her bed and took her right hand in his good one. She gave him a sad smile, and held on. They said nothing, simply stayed in each other's presence, until a doctor came in the room and gently requested Hiccup return to his room.

He went, had a small snack, carefully washed himself - not without grudgingly accepting help - before once again trying to sleep.

The next morning, their group set about preparing to return to the capital. Hiccup got ready relatively quickly and then helped Ruff wear as much of her armor as she could manage. Not directly, but he did stop her from permanently scarring the poor maids who attempted to help her dress with her swearing.

Much to Ruff's embarrassment and Hiccup's mirth, her injury forced her to ride side-saddle. It took several minutes until a sputtering Ruffnut was finally safely seated. Hiccup himself required some help to get on the horse, but could otherwise ride normally.

They departed from Varnas with double the guards they initially arrived with. Hiccup was informed that a runner from the Queen had arrived early in the morning and relayed several - quite furious - orders. Varnas was, even now, crawling with soldiers attempting to root out any potential remnant of enemy presence.

A lost cause, Hiccup knew. If their attackers were half as smart as they'd appeared so far they'd be long gone. No doubt the Queen knew this too, but it was still common sense to check.

Despite the relatively short journey there, it took them almost two days to return to Arendelle, mainly because Ruff was forced to ride very, very slowly, so as to not aggravate her still fragile side. Still, Hiccup didn't mind not jostling his arm and giving his wound time to heal.

From afar, a day before reaching their destination, Hiccup could make out the fierce storm raging in the distance. He pointed it out to the head of their guard detail, who squinted at it.

“I don't think it's directly above the city,” Hiccup noted.

The lieutenant nodded. "The Queen's work, no doubt."

As they came closer to Arendelle, the storm in the distance grew and grew. What was that woman doing?

Their arrival was met with surprisingly little fanfare. Hiccup didn't expect a huge crowd, but no doubt news of their attack had reached the city, and he had expected at least some curious onlookers.

When one of the local guards they passed through was asked, his reply was: "Everyone not working is watching the fjord."

Hiccup could understand that. The massive blizzard spanned miles in diameter, and stopped just shy of the capital itself. The harbor had been closed and the ships had been grounded for almost two days now.

Hiccup himself opted to take their company the long way around to the castle, hoping that passing through the harbor would give him a clearer glimpse of the snowstorm. The lieutenant, being curious himself, agreed.

There was not much to see. The blizzard was gigantic and chaotic, dark clouds covering the horizon and limiting their view considerably. Hiccup had never seen anything like it, not even in the far north. The raging blizzard was blowing around tons of snow, and thunder struck often among the gathered clouds as the Queen's wrath raged, terrible but not unchecked. If he didn't know any better, he'd have assumed that the Gods of Asgard were waging war on the mortal realm.

Perhaps most impressive was how contained the storm was. Though huge, it had clearly defined limits, to the point where even though the worst blizzard Hiccup had ever seen was raging just a couple kilometers away, the weather above Arendelle was, well, nice. Sunny, normal.

He exchanged a look with Ruffnut. Her eyes were wide and disbelieving, but there was no denying the storm.

The impressive display of sorcery put a lot of things into perspective for Hiccup, as well. Did it matter that he had managed a victory through trickery, in the face of this? Against such a demigoddess, what could he and Toothless offer? He and his companion were limited by their physical forms and capabilities, but the Queenâ€| what was she limited by?

He shook his head, discarding such thoughts from his mind. Magnificent and dangerous though the Snow Queen was, a person's worth was judged by more than their abilities, and he would be better served worrying about his injuries right now.

They were quickly allowed through the castle gates and into the Courtyard. Hiccup could see, here as well as into the city proper, that the guards were abuzz with activity. The whole of Arendelle was mobilizing.

In the Courtyard they were met by the Princess, some of the council members and a small entourage.

They dismounted with some difficulty, the soldiers taking the horses and heading towards the barracks, helped by several of their local colleagues and castle staff. Two of the nearby guards stood next to Hiccup, to which he raised an eyebrow but didn't otherwise react.

Princess Anna and her cohorts approached him and Ruffnut. His friend stayed by his side, perhaps a bit closer than necessary, but understandably so after their recent ordeal.

The princess looked suitably horrified upon gazing at their bandaged wounds. She seemed at a loss for words, which drew an amused chuckle from Hiccup.

"Hey, Anna," he said conversationally. "How have you been?"

She sputtered. "How have I- that's all you have to say after what happened?"

"What do you expect me to say? Let's go inside, it's getting cold." It wasn't, but Hiccup really wanted to go in, eat, wash, and reunite with Toothless, who must have been frenzied by now.

Anna fell in step next to him. Hiccup spared a look at her followers, courtiers and members of the inner council that stood here and there, unsure of what to do. No doubt, the princess forewent protocol when welcoming them. Seeing the three of them head inside by themselves, they dispersed, the official reception hijacked by the princess.

Anna was very upset, fretting all over Hiccup and even Ruffnut, nervously demanding a recounting of the events even though she'd heard the report. Hiccup obliged her, giving her a description of what happened, though leaving out the more graphic details.

"That's horrible," Anna exclaims once he has concluded, and Hiccup could tell that she really meant it. She looked just as distressed as when Elsa was attacked. Anna was really a kind soul. A rare thing to find, during such times.

"No doubt," he agreed, then turned his gaze out through a window, from which the raging blizzard was still visible in the distance. "What's going on over there, Anna?"

Anna took a brief look outside, herself, before shaking her head. "Elsa didn't take the news of our losses and your injuries very well," she said. "She's been out there almost three days now. Half the castle is in an uproar. The council is fuming over the closing of the harbor. We've had to redirect all incoming traffic to nearby, smaller ports. I'm not sure what Elsa is trying to accomplish," she admitted. "But I hope she does it soon. There are more worrying things that need her attention."

"What's happened?"

Anna looks at Hiccup, then at Ruffnut, then back at Hiccup, biting her lower lip. Eventually, she relents, trusting in him. He appreciated this trust. "Small incursions along the borders, freezing of diplomatic relations, trade embargoesâ€œ things are spiraling out

of control."

Hiccup frowned. All those sounded likeâ€œ "War?"

Anna shook her head frantically. "No! Not yet, at least. It looks bad, but maybe we can fix this. Hopefully things won't escalate to that degree."

Hiccup admired her determination, even if he didn't share her optimism. "I hope so."

Anna lead them to their floor, stopping in front of Ruffnut's rooms.

"Food will be brought to you," she said. "The doctors said you need rest. Is there anything else you require?"

"Nothing. 'Scuse me," Ruff said as she slipped inside her rooms after a very brief bow. Barf's excitement was audible even through the thick doors as they continued on down the hallway towards his own quarters.

"Rest sounds good right now," Hiccup noted with a nod. "Just make sure to tell Elsa I need to talk to her when she gets back?"

Anna nodded. "She'll want to talk to you, no doubt. I'm really sorry about all this, Hiccup. If we knew this would happen, we'd never have-"

"You didn't though," he cut her off. "There's plenty of blame to go around, justâ€œ not now, yeah?"

She nodded again, lips pursed, expression worried, but didn't insist. "Rest up and get well soon."

Hiccup bowed his head and went inside. His eyes immediately scanned the place for Toothless. He located his companion in his usual spot on the balcony, next to the broken door, limbs askew.

The Night Fury, having no doubt smelled him coming, all but pounced on him, barely missing the frame of the removed door, tongue lolling and releasing loud yipping noises.

Hiccup too laughed when Toothless curled around him in an embrace and gave him a long lick.

"I missed you too, buddy."

Toothless' excitement lasted only as long as it took him to notice the other prominent smell on Hiccup - that of his own blood - and notice the state of his arm. When he did his eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared and he started growling threateningly from low in his throat, ear flaps flat against his head.

"Easy, bud. I'm okay now, the fight is over."

It took quite a bit for Toothless to calm down, time during which Hiccup made sure to hold his friend's neck and caress his head in soothing motions. Hiccup explained everything that had happened to Toothless. The dragon may not understand him perfectly, or even think

in a way that would allow him to follow the narrative of events, but the sound of Hiccup's voice still helped calm him down.

He bathed with difficulty, getting the dirt and grime of the journey off his tired body, along with the dragon saliva. As he prepared for bed, the snowstorm still raged in the distance.

His thoughts idly drifted to Elsa as he lay down, feeling the exhaustion hit him like a physical thing. With all that had happened, he hadn't given any thought as to his hopeless situation with the Snow Queen. Was he destined to always be too hesitant, too slow, too incompetent?

Perhaps.

Sleep overcame him before long.

~H~

He woke up groggily the next day, wincing before even opening his eyes from the wound on his shoulder. He'd accidentally laid some weight on it, and it was not happy.

He dressed and went outside, leaving Toothless still sleeping on the balcony. Ernie was waiting for him outside the door. The young man was doing his best to keep his professional composure, but Hiccup could easily see the worry evident in his eyes and expression, or the tense way in which he stood. He looked him up and down, eyes lingering on his injured shoulder.

As they walked to the breakfast room, they talked. Ernie told him that he'd heard what had happened from the Princess, and Hiccup told him some of his thoughts regarding the incident.

Outside the castle, the storm was winding down.

"Perhaps the Queen will return soon," Ernie ventured, hope clear in his voice as he looked outside.

Though less confident, Hiccup silently agreed.

He had breakfast with the princess, her beau Kristoff, and two members of the council. They were polite, wishing him a quick recovery but asking no questions, for which he was thankful.

Discussion over the table circled through several state issues, such as the mood of the populace, reports from the border and other such related things. The ice master was reporting what he heard from the common people while working outside the city, Anna was keeping her contributions to a minimum face uncharacteristically frowning and lips pursed, and Hiccup stayed out of the discussion altogether.

After breakfast, he returned to Toothless, who was just polishing off his own. Toothless very eagerly agreed to go flying, though Hiccup cautioned him to go slowly, since he was still injured.

When landing some time later, Hiccup found the castle abuzz with activity, servants rushing everywhere and soldiers looking more alert

than ever.

Ernie greeted him on the Courtyard as soon as landed, and together the three of them headed inside.

"What's all the commotion about?"

"The Queen returned sometime this morning."

"I see." No wonder everyone was nervous, after an absence of days. Indeed, the storm had died down, now reduced to light snowing as the heavy clouds dispersed. Hiccup had noticed this during his earlier flight.

"How isâ€| miss Thorston?"

Hiccup turned to the young man. Ernie was resolutely looking ahead, though his jaw was set firmly.

"You haven't been to see her?"

"Iâ€| didn't want to impose. It's still early."

"Well, let's go see her."

"I'm not sure if I shouldâ€|"

"Nonsense."

The three of them went to Ruff's quarters and knocked. A few curses and seconds later, the doors were opened to allow them entry. Ruffnut was inside but not alone, a nurse following her constantly, ignoring the viking woman's glares.

Ruffnut appeared fine at first glance, but upon closer inspection, one could see bandages cover most of her skin beneath her clothes, and a decent sized strip even went around her temples.

"Odin help me if I need you to open doors for me, woman!" Ruff cursed at the nurse.

"Of course, miss. Please don't strain yourself."

Ruff grunted in frustration, before directing her glare at him and Ernie. "Well, you coming in or what?"

The two of them went inside while Ruff opened the doors fully to allow Toothless entry. The Night Fury gave the blonde Viking an affectionate nudge with his snout, earning a laugh and a pat, before ambling to the open balcony to sit with Barf.

"How do you feel, miss Thorston?" Ernie asked once they had settled inside.

"That's a stupid question," she grumbled with a grimace. "And what with the Thorston crap, kid?"

"You gonna be alright?" Hiccup asked, diverting Ruff's attention.

"Sure."

"I'm sure Ernie is missing his instructor."

She grimaced. "Not much sparring I can do like this. I can still direct you, though," she told Ernie.

"I wouldn't ask for lessons from you in your condition."

"My condi-, bah. Done worse things in worse conditions, I'll have you know."

They spent a few minutes talking about injuries, the castle, their dragons and some of Ruffnut's stupider stunts over the years.

"Ernie," Hiccup asked his aide. "Why don't you go make sure Toothless hasn't scratched this balcony to oblivion, too?"

Ernie frowned in confusion, pursing his lips, but didn't object, getting up and heading to the big balcony where the dragons were lounging.

Hiccup turned to Ruff's nurse. "Missâ€¢| Jess, was it?"

The young woman blinked a couple times. "Ah, yes, lord Haddock."

"I'm sure taking care of Ruff must be tiring. Why don't you take this opportunity to stretch your legs a bit? I'll watch over her while you're gone."

She looked a little flustered. "Umâ€¢| I'm not sure if I should-"

"Nonsense, you must be feeling cooped up. Take a small break, yeah? I insist."

"...okay. Thank you."

She rose, bowed deeply, and left the apartment with hurried steps.

Ernie, bless him, saw this from outside and very deliberately closed the balcony door, with him still outside.

Smart kid.

"Alright, Ruff said with grunt, "What do you want to tell me that even your boy toy can't hear?"

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "_My_ boy toy? I thought you had dibs."

Ruff glared at him. "You've some nerve saying that after you basically ordered me that there was to be no touching."

"What can I say, Ernie has some ways to go before he can take your tender mercies."

"I'd be nice to him. Mostly."

Hiccup snorted. "I'm sure."

"Just because you were too much of a sissy-"

"Don't," he cut her off, shaking finger at her. "Don't even go there. We promised to forget that ever happened."

Ruff rolled her eyes. "Best sex of his life and he-"

"Ruff, seriously, cut it out."

"Then fucking get on with it before Barf wants a piece of Ernie to wash down his food."

Hiccup's light expression melted as his brow furrowed. "How soon can you fly?"

"My answer or the nurse's?"

"Yours."

"Give me two days and I'll be good."

"Okay," Hiccup said with a nod. "That's good."

"What are we doing?"

"I need you to go back to Berk."

Ruff glared. "Out of the question."

"It's not a request."

"If you think I'm leaving you here alone-"

"Ruff-"

"-then you must have gotten hit in the head, because-"

"Ruff!"

She stopped her tirade at his angry exclamation, though her angry frown remained. It was matched by Hiccup's glower as they stared each other down in silence for a few seconds.

"You can't expect me to believe that this is over."

Hiccup shook his head as his glare abated. "It's not."

"And you want me to leave you alone here? Are you nuts?"

"You've done enough, you're injured. Go back to Berk, get healed properly."

"I'll be fine before long."

"It's not just that," Hiccup said, brushing at his slight stubble. "I want you to check in on the situation back home. I've been gone long,

and I don't trust those two not to try and make a move, despite the season. I need to know how things stand."

Ruff pursed her lips. Though no longer yelling, her voice still carried her trademark stubbornness. "You could send a message to Fishlegs."

Hiccup shook his head again. "I need someone the warriors can follow. Ruffnut, this isn't a request."

"Fine!" she grunted out. "I'll fucking go, alright? Just tell me why."

Hiccup leaned back on his chair, letting out a long exhale.

"They came for me, Ruff," he said, tone contemplative. "The attack was aimed at me. So long as they come directly at me, I can face them. But if they find another venue of attack, say, someone close to me, the game will change. I can't stay on top of this and keep you safe at the same time. I can't afford to watch your back until you fully recover."

Ruff's jaw was set, nostrils flaring for a few seconds, but she kept whatever outburst contained. In the end, she gingerly relaxed deeper into her chair.

"I'll go the day after," she said into the silence, receiving a nod from her chief.

She turned her head to look at him. "But Hiccup, you know that wasn't the end of it, right?"

"The Queen's enemies seem to think I am a danger to their plans, yes."

"Who will be watching your back if I'm gone, then?"

"I have Toothless."

She snorted. "You'll both get killed."

"Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not."

"I'm scared for you, Hiccup," she admitted, which took Hiccup by more surprise than he was comfortable with. "This is getting dangerous, even by your standards. Why do you even have to stay here? Come with me back to Berk, they can't follow us there."

He shook his head. "I had a hand in creating this mess. I'm involved. I need to stay, at least a bit longer."

Ruff narrowed her eyes at him. "Is that really the reason you're getting involved in this? Are you sure it's not about her?"

"It's not- Don't give me that look."

"Stop fucking lying to me."

"Fine. It's not just that, okay?"

Ruff didn't look the least bit convinced, but at least she let it drop. "No one could ever stop you when you had something stupid in mind."

Hiccup let out wry chuckle.

"This isn't funny, Hiccup. We're already in the middle of a war or two, and you want to get involved in another?"

"It won't go that far."

"You're risking a whole lot to help your girl's kingdom, Hiccup."

"Only myself."

"Are you listening to yourself? Do you have any idea what would happen to us if you were gone?"

"My priority will always be Berk, you know that."

She narrowed her eyes. "Do I?"

Hiccup glared at her. "Do you seriously doubt my intentions?"

Ruff shook her head. "No. But Hiccup, you're in love. Your judgement-"

"My judgement is fine. Trust me please, I'd never endanger Berk."

She bit her lip, obviously holding back from arguing further. "I hope you're right, Hiccup."

Hiccup didn't reply, instead turned his gaze to the balcony, where Ernie was scratching Toothless and Barf's necks simultaneously.

He hoped so, too.

~H~

Later that evening, Ernie found him in his quarters as he was writing in his journal. After a brief exchange of greetings, Ernie let him know that the Queen was waiting for him in the throne room. She'd like a word before Court opened for the evening.

Hiccup had no better plans for the evening, and a talk with the Queen was long overdue. Toothless was napping on the open balcony, so he left the dragon in peace.

"How do I look?" He asked Ernie once he was ready, wearing a light green tunic and after a shave.

"Positively dashing," the young servant replied, not with a little bit of sarcasm. "Now can we go? The Queen is waiting."

Hiccup snorted as they made their way outside and down the hall. "Ah, but Ernie, being fashionably late is half the charm."

"Not sure how well that applies when meeting sovereigns."

"It's especially true when meeting leaders, Ernie. Appearances are everything. If you can establish the mood you want before the talking even begins, you've half won already."

"And yet we're going to be on time."

"Mhm," Hiccup said as they approached the - heavily guarded - throne room. "As I said, appearances are everything, and the timing depends on what impression you want to leave."

"I'm sure I'll keep that in mind when it's my time to ascend to the throne."

"You're dismissive now, but when you want to court a nice girl you'll realize the truth of what I'm saying, but I'll be gone by then, so you'll be on your own."

"I somehow think I'll manage. Now, I'll announce you, wait here."

"Cheeky brat."

Hiccup waited while Ernie was first allowed in, the doors closed after him, then a few seconds later he came back out and beckoned him inside. Such a wasteful customâ€¦ no matter.

He walked in, taking stock of the wide room around him. The throne room was empty as of yet. The only people present were on the other side of the chamber, in front of the regal throne. The Queen was there, clad in an exquisite deep purple dress, crown firmly in place and hair perfectly braided. No doubt she wanted to make a statement tonight, and not just with words.

Next to her was none other than the Commander General. Hiccup narrowed his eyes when he saw the older man. General Mertok, for his part, ended whatever discussion he was having with the Queen as Hiccup approached, gave her a deep bow, and exited the chamber through a smaller door on the other corner.

By the time Hiccup reached her, they were alone.

Hiccup was unsure what to say, or even how to address her. The situation between them being what it was, and with recent events added on top of that, he wasn't sure what tone he should go with.

Apparently, neither was she, judging by the silence and the hesitation in her posture. Hiccup decided to save both of them some awkwardness by breaking the proverbial ice.

"Spending days in a blizzard agrees with you," he said after giving her an exaggerated once-over. "You should definitely do it more often."

Her lips quivered in a smile. "I'll keep that in mind. You'd be surprised what hail does for the skin."

"I'm sure you've heard this a lot today, but I just can't contain myselfâ€¦ what were you doing out there?"

She brought up a gloved hand, looking at the inside of her palm in contemplation.

"What, indeed?" she mused. Frost slowly, almost lazily, danced around her hand. "What was it you called it?" A pause. "Ah, yes. I believe I was... testing my limits. Expanding on them. Seeing how much I can do."

"I do recall saying something to that effect," Hiccup said with a smile. It was a good enough answer to satisfy his curiosity, and it seemed to serve well enough in orienting the Queen on what she wanted to discuss.

"I know everything that happened on your mission," she said, expression turning grave. "However, I feel I should ask you, was anything left out? Is there something else that I need to know?"

Hiccup considered, but in the end shook his head. "No, I don't think so." They'd never really been alone during the mission, and she should've gotten a pretty accurate account by her men by now.

"There is that, at least," she allowed with a tired exhale. "The whole operation turned into such a disaster."

Hiccup pursed his lips, repressing a scathing retort. Yes, it had turned into a colossal fuckup. The Queen's intelligence gathering organization - or what passed for one - had done such a horrendously bad job that they managed to turn an ambush they created into an ambush for them.

Normally Hiccup would have no qualms about giving Elsa a piece of his mind for the incompetence of her administration. Howeverâ€¦ looking at her now, at the strained look in her eyes, he felt no need to add to her burden. No doubt, she was feeling the weight of her failure and the loss of life acutely.

Swallowing his pride and anger in that instant was almost a physical thing for Hiccup. Unable to express those, he turned to the only other feeling he had about the whole situation. Guilt. "I'm really sorry about what happened. If I had known they were onto us, I would never have switched places. I'm sorry about your men."

Queen Elsa drew in a heavy breath. "I really want to be mad at you, you know?" she said. "You agreed before you left here, you explicitly agreed to go along with our plan. Instead, you did what?"

"I'm sorry-"

"You lied to me once again. It's very tempting to be angry with you. Considering the circumstances, however, I don't think I can."

Hiccup frowned. "You're not mad at me for getting your people killed?"

She shook her head. "You didn't get anyone killed."

"If I hadn't switched at the last second-"

"You'd be the one dead right now, is that what you mean?" Hiccup gave a tentative nod. Elsa let out a sigh. "It's not a choice between you, Hiccup. My people were there to protect you, even at the cost of their lives. It is fortunate that you switched when you did. We had promised you safety when you agreed to this, and we failed in almost every possible way. If anyone is to blame for these losses, it's me. I am responsible for letting this mission occur, and for getting duped so thoroughly."

Damn her for making him feel bad for wanting to blame her. Gods dammit, but it was her fault, as well as his. Maybe not hers personally, but she was the queen, and directly responsible for the competence of her subjects and the missions she authorized. Regardless of all this, what came out of his mouth was: "You couldn't have known this would happen, Elsa."

"Nor could you, so stop considering yourself responsible."

"I guess the blame game has no winners."

"I'm sorry, Hiccup, for everything."

He shook his head, rubbing his at his eyes. This was so frustrating. "Rather than that, what are you doing to figure out what caused this?"

She frowned. "Internal investigations are underway as we speak. I can't speak about it, but rest assured."

"Yeah, not quite assured yet. Did you look up on the boat?"

She nodded. "It was logged as a merchant vessel from Megara, and yet it left a day after you asked me about it. No transactions were made with its crew, either, from what I gathered. It was quite strange, but the ship was gone before we had a chance to question the crew."

"As I feared," Hiccup said.

"What do you know of it, Hiccup?"

"I'm pretty sure the crew were Grandlandians."

She raised a perfect eyebrow. "How sure?"

"They were definitely not from Megara, at least." Megarii had very light complexions, in direct contrast to the darker skin tones of the Grandlandians.

"Anything else?"

He nodded. "Yes, but you won't like it."

"Try me."

He shook his head once. "Promise me you won't dismiss it out of hand."

"What's this about, Hiccup?"

"Promise me."

She let out a sigh and made a habitual move of tucking a strand behind her ear. "Fine, I promise to give it due consideration."

"I followed someone out of the castle. I made sure he didn't see me. He met up with the Protector Divisive, and together they had a pretty long talk with the crew of that ship."

She frowned. "The Protector Divisive? That's pretty worrying. Who else? Who did you follow?"

"The Commander General himself."

Her eyes widened impressively, her mouth opening and closing once, but no sound came out. She brought a hand to rub at her eyes, regaining her composure.

"Are you sure-"

"Yes, I'm sure it was him."

"There must be a good explanation for this."

He glared at her. "Elsa!"

"Are you suggesting the Commander general of my armed forces, inner council member, peer of my father, is a traitor?" Her tone was calm, but dangerous. Hiccup considered his next words carefully.

"I'm not suggesting anything," Hiccup argued. "I'm only asking you to look at the facts. If he were involved, he would have known everything needed to organize the attack on you. He had everything he needed to know to foil this mission, which almost went perfectly for the enemy. He talked to the Grandlandians behind your back. He seemed pretty close with their Ambassador when he was here, the guards of whom attacked me just outside the castle."

Hiccup stopped for breath.

"This is ridiculous, Hiccup. Shad has been-"

"And let's not forget," Hiccup cut her off. "That he has the most to gain by your removal."

She shook her head. "No, Hiccup. Shad has been one of my staunchest supporters. He's been supporting my family since my father's reign."

"Is it impossible that he has grown weary of your rule?"

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"I've read the logs. They're public access, even if there aren't any details. Most of the General's propositions got shot down by your father. Later, from you as well. This recent commotion has seen more and more of his ideas implemented, has it not?"

Elsa was looking at him with a set jaw and narrowed eyes. "That is

technically true."

"Is it that unthinkable that this is some sort of plan? To cut out the middleman and set the stage, as they say?"

"If I'm gone, my sister—"

"If you're killed, suspicion will immediately fall to Grandland. A war will probably break out. The laws are written such that the General could usurp executive control from Anna for its duration. And from there... anything can happen to consolidate his rule."

Elsa hitched a breath. She looked paler than ever.

She shook her head again, perhaps to clear it, perhaps in denial. When she spoke, her voice was low, tired. "You don't know what you're asking of me, Hiccup."

When she looked up at him, her eyes were almost pleading. "Shad has been there all my life. He and Gertrude were the closest thing to parental figures I've had after my parents' deaths. He's always been supporting. Now you're telling me that he's a traitor? No," she said, with a shake of her head. "I can't believe that. I refuse to."

Hiccup bit his lip. This was delicate. A wrong push, and he wouldn't achieve anything here.

"I'm not telling you to march up and arrest him for treason," he argued. "But the fact remains, a lot of things don't add up. You've been attacked inside your home, I've been attacked twice since I got here, and I've no doubt that when I'm gone the target will once again be you. Don't interrupt, please," he said with a raised hand when Elsa made to cut him off. "The fact is, you have a traitor in your midst. High-up, too. A lot of things don't add up with the General, and he stands to gain the most. Can you really afford to dismiss this, with the fate of both our lives, your sister's, and your kingdom itself at stake?"

Elsa was angry, he could tell. Her eyes were narrowed, her breath was coming out faster than usual, and her lips were a thin, angry line. Nevertheless, she took in his words in silence, taking a deep, calming breath.

"I still don't believe you," she said after a minute of contemplation. "But you're right, I can't afford to dismiss this. Even if there's the slightest chance, the slightest doubt, I want it dispelled. I can't have suspicions cast on those closest to me." She tilted her head to the side, looking at him. "What would you have me do, then?"

Hiccup's mind whirled. Surely she wasn't leaving such an important decision up to him. He was a foreigner, a guest. Entangled as they may be personally, he had no pull when it came to executive decisions. She may trust his judgement, but after naming one of the people closest to her traitor, he rather doubted she was legitimately asking him for advice. This was a test of some kind.

"It's not my place to tell you what to do," he said with a shrug. "But at the very least, keep a close eye on him. Look into what I

told you, make your own conclusions. There is too much at stake here. The next time you plan something, keep in mind the very real possibility that it will be leaked."

She nodded along with his words, mollified at least to a certain degree.

"What will you do?" she asked him.

"I'll attend Court. After that, I was thinking of getting a snack."

She seemed confused. "You're not planning to leave?"

Ah, now he understood. "No, not just yet. Ruff will be leaving the day after tomorrow though, her injuries are quite extensive."

The Queen flinched. Barely, but Hiccup caught it. "Once again, I'm sorry about what happened. You put a lot of trust in us, and a lot of things on the line."

"No need for plural, Elsa," he said, pointing a finger at her. "I trust you, personally. Certainly not the rest of your administration. And please stop apologising when you're grieving for your men. It makes me feel petty."

She nodded. A touch of hesitation.

Whatever she was about to say Hiccup would never know, because at that time the doors opened and a servant came in. After bowing, he informed Elsa that it was time for the courtiers to trickle in the room.

She nodded curtly to the servant, before turning back to Hiccup. For his part, he understood that a lot was left unsaid between them. Now was just not the right time.

"We'll talk soon?" he asked, receiving a nod in reply. Hiccup inclined his head and turned, heading towards his usual spot in the throne room as the rest of courtiers filled the chamber, throwing him and the Queen curious looks.

Elsa quickly assumed her position and Court was called into session. Elsa rather firmly discouraged everyone from asking why the absence of days was necessary, asking for their trust in her judgement. Most of the evening's discussion was about stabilising trade after the port's emergency closing, along with catching up with foreign officials and important internal matters.

Hiccup paid attention, of course, but only partly. His mind was elsewhere. In many different places, actually.

After Court, he found Toothless, and together they joined Ruff and Barf for dinner. Ruff noticed his pensive mood and left him to it, for which he was thankful.

That night in his room, he sat on his desk, enjoying the breeze coming in from the broken balcony door while Toothless snoozed outside. His journal was open, and he would write a little every once in a while, or just peruse previous pages. Images and descriptions of

places, machinery, objects, people.

He lingered on the drawings of his friends, Ruff's words echoing in his mind. Now, in the silence of his own thoughts, and acutely aware of the immediate danger to him and his own, he found it harder and harder to deny that the only reason he was still here was Elsa.

The noose was closing around her neck, no doubt. The attempts so far had been foiled, but the enemy grew bolder and bolder. Things would come to a head, and soon. It didn't help that Elsa's faction seemed to be compromised quite deeply. Perhaps with his help, she would make it out of this ordeal alive. Be that by drawing out her enemies by being a target himself, or by giving her advice, he couldn't in good conscience abandon her now when her life was on the line. Not just hers, but likely Anna's, too.

No, he couldn't in good conscience abandon them. But he had a responsibility. He was Chief of Berk. He'd already been gone for long, he had to return soon. He should never have stayed this long in the first place. But every time he tried to convince himself that he had to leave, Elsa's face popped into his mind. Laughing, blushing, angry, confused. And finally, pale, unmoving, dead.

And he couldn't quite convince himself to pack up and go.

He could allow himself a few more days. Hopefully he would see things through. If the situation on Berk was okay, even in his absence, perhaps he wouldn't have to depart immediately. But there was no telling if his absence had been taken advantage of. This was riskyâ€| very risky.

Hiccup couldn't resist the groan that escaped him. Ruffnut, gods damn her, was right. He was being stupid. He should have returned to Berk long ago. He was putting everything on the line for what could well be a passing-

His gaze lingered on an older sketch, one of Astrid swinging her axe with savage glee.

Sleep did not come easily to Hiccup that night.

~H~

He spent breakfast of the next day watching the Queen and her sister, not really participating in the conversation, himself. He must not have been controlling his expression quite as well as he thought, because the Queen gave him a few strange looks, but didn't press him on it.

The rest of the day was spent with Toothless, Ruff and Barf. She couldn't ride just yet, but the four of them still found plenty to do. Ernie also joined them, sometime after lunch. The blonde viking had apparently exhausted her supply of advice or threats for Hiccup, because she made no mention of anything serious. She respected his mood and didn't become too much of a nuisance, instead choosing to take her aggression out on Ernie by giving him his last sword instructions.

Of course, her idea of a lesson in which she couldn't participate was to invite Gregor to cordially beat Ernie senseless under the guise of

education, but as it was all in the name of learning, Hiccup let it happen.

He spent the day lost in his thoughts. Grandpabbie's words, Ruffnut's words, even Elsa's, swirling in his mind, confusing him further. The Queen herself was rather busy that day, apparently, as was most of the castle's inhabitants. There was a lot going on behind the scenes. Stuff that Hiccup, as a guest, wasn't privy to. The mobilization was evident to anyone with eyes, however. Soldiers came and left with new orders every hour or so, and the only sight he caught of Elsa was during breakfast and, later, at Court.

He sometimes wished that his best friend wasn't a dragon. As much as he loved Toothless - and he did, more than he could describe - his draconid friend could do nothing to help him with matters of the human heart. Toothless, of course, had sensed his unease, and the best solution the Night Fury had come up with was to pester Hiccup to go flying. Not a plan he was opposed to, quite the contrary. The adrenaline of their usual stunts allowed him to empty his mind for a bit and just enjoy the rush.

Later, when peacefully gliding above the clouds, the vastness and majesty of the sky gave him the perspective he needed to think. Human or not, Toothless always knew what he needed. More so than most humans, at any rate. The flight helped relax him and stem the rising panic.

He spent the evening writing in his journal, relaxing his aching left hand and putting his thoughts down on paper. It always helped put things in perspective for him, even if often put him in trouble when Astrid would inevitably stumble on them.

He paused in his writing. It all came back to Astrid, did it not? It had always been about her, in some way or another.

He did not remember his dreams the next morning, but perhaps that was for the best, considering he woke up feeling rather dejected.

On the morning of her departure, Ruffnut was rather irritable. Her injuries had stabilised to the point where casual flight wouldn't open them again, but she made no effort to hide her disagreement with his decisions.

The Queen had taken the time see her off, as was proper, though only a cordial farewell was exchanged before she joined her sister at the sides of the Courtyard. Besides them, their dragons, the Queen and her entourage, some people Ruff had met were also here to see her off, most of them soldiers who'd sparred with her. Hiccup saw her exchange a promise of visit with Gregor, and smiled.

The smile was lost when she turned her gaze to him and instantly scowled.

"Come back alive," she told him as she climbed on Barf's saddle and the Zippelback spread his wings, Frot flying around him like an excited mosquito. "Or I will fucking kill you. And you," she directed her gaze to Toothless, who perked up. "You'd better bring him back, you hear?"

Hiccup smiled as Toothless warbled something in affront. "Safe

travels, Ruff."

Barf began ascending with powerful beats of his wings. Toothless rose to his back feet and let out a loud cry in goodbye, one echoed by the rapidly vanishing Zippelback.

Hiccup watched them go, a myriad of emotions going through his mind. He was shaken from his thoughts by a gentle tug on his hands. He looked down, and saw his palm among the Queen's two hands, a small smile on her face.

"She'll be fine."

Hiccup echoed her own smile. "Yeah."

"I'm glad you stayed."

Hiccup looked at her again, seeing the earnestness in her expression. Hesitation, fear, hope, all were evident.

He nodded at her. "I'm staying to help you," he said. Hiccup saw no point in hiding that fact. "If there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to ask me."

Was that disappointment on her face?

"You've done more than—"

"Just," he cut her off. "Keep that in mind, yeah? I'm trying to keep you alive."

That seemed to sober her up, enough to give him a solemn nod. "I will keep your words in mind."

He nodded, too, before turning to Toothless. The Night Fury was looking in the distance where Barf had vanished, sad little croons emanating from low in his throat. Hiccup put a hand on his friend's neck and rubbed him gently.

"There there, Toothless. We'll see them, soon."

They headed inside, and Hiccup spent most of the day trying to cheer Toothless up with Ernie's help. They spent some time in the gardens, took a brief flight around the fjord, then watched in amusement as Ernie tried to clean the Night Fury with the same determination as the castle's silverware.

Seeing the two of them made Hiccup smile. Despite Toothless' grumbles or Ernie's chagrin, they'd very clearly accepted and even liked each other. After such a short period of time, Ernie found it natural to take a mop and clean Toothless' scales with absolutely no fear. It was inspiring, in a way. A perfect example of Hiccup's vision. In an ideal world, this would be how everyone treated dragons.

Of course, the world was far from ideal. Hiccup knew that very well. Perhaps his campaign to achieve that world was doomed from its conception. But by the gods, he would try. He would not abandon the seemingly impossible effort like some, nor attempt to circumvent the problem entirely by enslaving the dragons like others. That was what he was trying to accomplish, back in the archipelago.

But instead he was here, in the perhaps unrealistic hope that he'd be able to save one woman from the conspiracy closing in around her.

Perhaps he was dwelling too much on it. Or perhaps not enough.

He attended Court. Though he would not admit it under threat of torture, he didn't pay attention to what was going on. His sole focus rested on Elsa. She was wearing a soft blue dress this time, her braid styled slightly differently. She appeared to be wearing just enough makeup to cover her tiredness, the signs of which he saw at breakfast and later, at the Courtyard.

He watched her talk to her Courtiers from her throne. Noted the elegant way she sat, the level but firm tone of voice she used when making her assertions. While he did, their experiences together were mixed with those observations. Their ill-fated fight at the mountain pass, the tense journey to the capital, the days of mistrust and deceit. The revelation of their feelings, leading to the current situation.

He couldn't leave the Throne Room fast enough after Court was dismissed.

Toothless once again wanted to go flying, but Hiccup didn't really feel like it at this time. What he needed was some peace and quiet to deal with his thoughts. To that end, he assembled the black tailfin and outfitted Toothless with it.

"I know you're bored and worried, bud," he told Toothless, scratching behind one of his ear flaps. "I know I've been out there lately. I'm sorry for ignoring you."

The Night Fury crooned and lightly poked his snout on Hiccup's chest, making his lips quirk up in a small smile.

"Thanks, bud. This will be over soon. Just wait. We need to help her though. Will you help me do that?"

Toothless' tongue filled the right side of his face with slobber in reply. Hiccup chuckled, even as he pried the draconid saliva off his face.

"Thanks, Toothless. I just need some time to think. I've put it off for long enough."

Toothless crooned sadly again, but after nudging him one more time, he pulled back. With one last worried look, Toothless walked to the balcony and shot up, flying off into the night sky.

Hiccup followed him outside through the broken door, his eyes losing him in all of three seconds. It was impossible to see Toothless in the night sky, he knew this well.

Now alone, Hiccup took a look around. The balcony floor had been scratched up, unavoidable after weeks of being used as a dragon's nest. The balcony door he had yet to fix. It still leaned by the left wall.

Hiccup let out a sigh. He'd always been a problem solver. He worked best under pressure. Well, he had a problem, and he felt under quite a bit of pressure. He'd let that problem stew for a good while - ignored it, even - but he couldn't afford to do that anymore.

He went over to the edge of the balcony, leaning against the marble railing. It really was scenic. The sun had long since set, and the half-moon's light was not enough to hide the stars on such a clear night. The fjord was silent, a single merchant ship slowly pulling away towards open water. The forest in the distance was lightly swinging to the wind.

The soft breeze was pulling at his tunic and tugging at his hair. It'd gotten long again.

Hiccup run a hand through his hair. Funny. He'd never particularly cared about his hairstyle. The only reason he'd ever paid any attention to it was because of Astrid doing the same.

Most of his life had been about Astrid in one way or another. When he was very little, she was his friend. Later, she was everything he wanted to be. That feeling grew into a crush so massive it stayed in his mind for most of the day, every day, and got worse every time he saw her.

Then, of course, they got together, and his dependence on her only grew. He counted on her having his back, on stopping his madder plans or stupider ideas, making his hazy vision possible, on being there for him when he needed her. She had been the key to his happiness and the catalyst of his success. Their paths had been parallel - joined - for so long that when the gods decide to separate them, he was lost.

Even in death, Astrid had been the center of his world. He'd withdrawn into himself because of his guilt over her loss, but he'd continued to try his best for Berk. To his immense shame, the reason he had become Chief and given it his all so soon after her death instead of just collapsing or taking his own life wasn't because of some sense of duty to his homeland or his people. Not even because of his father's memory. He'd done it because he needed Berk to avenge her death. And he had done so. he had strengthened his tribe until they crushed all those responsible for her demise, that of his father and so many others, under their dragons' talons. After that, he continued being Chief because that was what Astrid would have wanted of him, what she had wanted of him when she was alive.

Even after years had passed and he'd come back to his senses with the help of his friends, Astrid was always on the back of his mind, driving him or plunging him in guilt and sorrow. He needed to lock away her memory if he wanted to function properly, and only open the lid when he was alone and had time to spare, because it always broke him, if only a little.

Tonight, memories of Astrid flowed freely and peacefully. Hiccup could remember everything clearly. Every expression, every needlessly complicated fighting move that still ended up working because she was Astrid, every moment they spent together.

Coming to Arendelle had changed him. Astrid's memory was no longer something that broke him. Hadn't been for some time now. Elsa had

changed that.

Hiccup had no idea what to do with himself without Astrid. She'd always been a part of his life one way or another, walking next to him and helping him along on his path for so long, that when she took a different turn he was left there, stranded and confused, unable to take another step and unable to follow after her. Waiting for something that wouldn't happen.

Until he was attacked by an ice sorceress and her soldiers, and he was once again courting death by challenging something way out of his league. Elsa Ellesmyre had given him a nudge, had given him the push he needed to take another, tentative step forward on the path. Either gently by hand or kicking and screaming, she'd forced him to stumble forward, for the first time in years moving from his frozen position.

The irony was not lost on him.

Out here on the balcony like this, looking over the peaceful fjord and for the first time in a while thinking clearly, the fact that he loved her was not lost on him, either.

Perhaps it wasn't to the degree Ruff had insinuated, or perhaps it was and he was still mistaken, but the truth was that he was in love with her. He didn't just like her, or feel simple attraction. He was drawn to her in a primal way, a feeling he'd felt only once before.

He loved Elsa. He was surprisingly okay with this realization. He'd known for a while, several days, probably. Lying to himself was something he'd become proficient at years ago, and partial lies were some of the best ways to do that. Making himself believe his attraction was something explainable, manageable and unimportant had been easy.

That didn't make his current predicament that much better, however. What should he do? Could he do anything? Astrid's memory still weighed heavily on his mind. It was all he'd ever known. What was he supposed to do?

Hiccup directed his gaze up, at the moon and the sparkling stars.

What would Astrid say? She'd have a few choice words with him, he was certain. If he ever made it to Valhalla he was in for quite the beating. No doubt, seeing him waste his life away in the name of her memory wasn't something she would condone. And yet, that's what he'd been doing for the last several years, and battled with even now.

Letting people, especially Astrid, down was something he had vast experience with. He needed her. Had needed her. It was Astrid that had allowed him, one way or another, to walk his path this far.

He couldn't transfer that duty over to Elsa. He couldn't, in good conscience, ask her to fill the same role Astrid had. That would only be confirming her accusations that he saw her as nothing but a substitute. No, Astrid's role in his life had been unique. If ever he wanted to move forward from now on, he'd have to do so under his own

power. Elsa had helped him along, and could do so again, but he couldn't rely on other people anymore.

He'd known Astrid as far back as he could remember himself. She'd been his significant other for a year before they were married. She'd been his wife for all of another before her untimely demise.

Would Astrid forgive him if he moved on without her? Would she forgive him for leaving her behind?

The night breeze picked up and Hiccup closed his eyes, feeling it caress his face and tousle his hair. He let out a sigh.

No doubt, she would. Gods, she'd probably punch him for even thinking that she would not.

The problem was that he'd stayed in that spot, the one he last saw Astrid in, for a long time. Could he really abandon that, and move on? Was it really that simple? Could he justâ€¦ move on, and keep walking his own path, separate from hers?

Hiccup blinked, once, twice, in surprise. The moon stared back at him, silent but comforting. He'd asked himself that question plenty of times lately, but never been able to answer it. But nowâ€¦ now was different.

Yes it was, and yes he could. He didn't know what he would do with Elsa - he didn't know if there was anything he could do, with their positions - but she had helped him realize this. He could walk his own path. It was time to let Astrid go. Time to let her stop worrying about him and rest. And when it was his time, if he was judged worthy to join her in the halls of their ancestors, she would smile at him, punch him in the shoulder like she always did, and tell him she was proud. He could picture it already.

Hiccup looked up at the sky again, a soft groan slipping past his lips. Was she watching him, from above? Could she listen to his thoughts? He could really use a little help right about now. If he could onlyâ€¦ speak to her, or see her, one last time, perhaps this would be a bit more clear.

He sighed again, letting his head drop. Wishing like this was useless, he knew,, yet still couldn't help but indulge.

He pushed off the railing. It was time to go inside and prepare for sleep. If he managed to sleep, in any case. And yet, he could not take his eyes off the peaceful view in front of him.

He should have known that backtracking without watching where he was stepping would backfire. His prosthetic caught against an incision on the floor, probably created by Toothless' tender mercies, and he lost his balance, falling backward. He collided solidly with the broken door that had been left to stand against the wall, his shoulder bearing the brunt of the force by hitting the doorknob but -thank the gods- missing his still tender injury.

He dropped, gasping in pain and rubbing the sore spot with his right hand. When he got back on his feet, he rubbed his sore shoulder and glared at the door, an angry remark on the edge of his tongue before he froze.

Perhaps he was mad. Perhaps he really had taken leave of his senses; perhaps the gods were playing a trick on him, or maybe he was tricking himself into believing what he wanted to believe, but that pain on that spot was familiar.

He turned his gaze to the starry sky, lips quivering. He felt the soft breeze on his face again.

"I love you, Astrid," he said clearly, into the night.

He walked carefully, avoiding further accidents, until he had passed the hinges that marked the end of the balcony and the beginning of the room.

He looked over his shoulder at the view outside, one last time.

"Goodbye."

He would fix the broken door tomorrow.

~H~

14. Hiccup 5, Final Act

~H~

**A Chance Encounter **

Hiccup 5

Act IV

~H~

* * *

><p>Dawn found Hiccup awake and refreshed. He'd gone to bed relatively early, and slept like a rock. If he dreamed, he had no recollection of it. Toothless had returned sometime in the night and lay curled on the balcony.</p>

He sat up on his bed, rubbing his eyes blearily. He scanned the room, from his sleeping friend and his neatly arranged possessions, to his notebook still waiting on the desk.

He got up, attaching his prosthetic with deft, mindless movements, brain still in the process of waking up. Washing his face brought the clarity and alertness that he sought in order to begin his day. He got dressed in a light blue tunic, tucking his dagger under the red sash around his waist, and considered his next move.

Ernie wouldn't be around for some time yet to take him to breakfast. He could set out on his own, but there wasn't much he had to do that he couldn't do here. The schematics for the Arendellian crossbow were on his desk, waiting for him to copy them and tinker with them. Of course he'd need a forge to bring his ideas beyond the theoretical, but even so.

There was also the notebook. Sitting on the chair, Hiccup considered the worn leather-bound book. Perhaps the crossbow designs could wait. Dragging the notebook and an inkpot closer to him, he set about putting some of his thoughts from last night in writing.

Last night had been progress, Hiccup knew. More importantly, he felt no different in the morning than he had at that time. His newfound clarity and peace, it seemed, were here to stay. He'd finally put one of his greatest issues to date to rest.

He paused in his writing, sending a small prayer to the heavens, before continuing.

Ernie found him around eight in the morning. After exchanging greetings, the two of them set out to the breakfast room.

"You look different this morning, Hiccup."

"Hm?" he wondered, turning to look at the shorter man. Ernie's eyes were looking at him curiously. "How so?"

"You're not frowning."

"I could, if it would set you at ease."

"... no, I rather prefer it like this. I was just curious."

Hiccup shrugged noncommittally. "Slept well, I suppose."

"Uh-huh." Hiccup ignored the evident disbelief in his voice, and Ernie for his part didn't continue that line of questioning.

Breakfast that morning was had solely with the princess and Kristoff. Anna beamed when she saw him, urging him to a seat and inquiring after his injuries. Hiccup humored her, answering her questions until the blond man helpfully diverted her attention, and the food started arriving.

To his surprise, Hiccup had developed quite the appreciation for the black liquid offered around at breakfast. He'd found it disgusting when he first tried it - and he still did - but he just... didn't mind as much anymore. It helped him focus, and it wasn't alcoholic.

He exchanged polite conversation with the two of them, comfortable enough in their presence not to hold back or be particularly careful with his speech, and breakfast passed pleasantly.

When he was done and excused, he went back up to get Toothless. He found his draconid companion polishing off his morning portion of what appeared to be beef, and walked next to him.

"Hey, Toothless," he said, putting a hand on the Night Fury's neck. "Seems I'm not the only one beginning to like the local cuisine."

Toothless ignored him, focused as he was on emptying his platter. When he finished and had thoroughly licked his lips, he turned to

Hiccup and crooned.

"I'm good, bud, thanks for asking," Hiccup said with a smile, scratching at just the right point high on the neck that he knew Toothless enjoyed but didn't quite leave him catatonic with bliss. "How're you?"

The happy warble was more than enough answer for Hiccup, who returned it with his own chuckle.

"I figured out some things last night, bud," he said. "Important things. It's all a bit clearer, now. Thank you for being so patient with me."

It didn't matter if Toothless couldn't understand exactly what he told him. The Night Fury was plenty smart, in his own way. He pushed his snout affectionately on Hiccup's chest, leaving no doubt as to his thoughts. Hiccup hugged the dragon's head in return.

Heart to heart over, Hiccup enlisted Ernie's help in procuring the tools necessary for repairing the balcony door.

"I can have the castle carpenter come and-"

"No," Hiccup said, shaking his head at Ernie as they carried the necessary supplies back to the rooms. "I broke it, I'll fix it."

"I don't see your zeal to fix it personally. It's the man's job to do repairs like this."

"Odin's beard, Ernie. It's symbolic. Don't ruin it."

"Symbolic of what?"

"Never you mind. It's something I gotta do, yeah?"

Ernie's shrug was enough of a reply.

Simply replacing the hinges and repositioning the door would have been a simple and quick job, but Hiccup insisted on replacing the knob with a custom made one, one wide enough for Toothless to use by pressing it downwards. This way, they'd avoid breaking the door again.

By the time he was finished, it was almost noon. Hiccup stood in front of the door, which appeared brand new, a smile on his face.

"Do you feel any better?"

Hiccup scowled, aiming his glare at his aide.

"I'm having a deeply impactful personal moment here. Do you mind?"

"Can I take the tools back now?"

Hiccup waved him away. "Take them and begone."

Ernie did so, but not before snickering at him once or twice. Hiccup

shook his head once the blonde Arendellian was outside. Hearing movement from where Toothless was sitting, he turned to his friend.

"What do you think, Toothless?"

The Night Fury was looking between him and the new door, head angled to the side and ear flaps raised, obviously confused.

Hiccup groaned, raising both hands upwards. "Nobody understands me!"

Toothless' curious growl made him stop the dramatics.

"Never mind, bud. Would you like to visit the gardens, today?"

Toothless did, and so they headed off after Hiccup cleaned himself up. Toothless didn't wear any of his gear and likewise Hiccup carried nothing but his hidden dagger, his notebook and a coal pencil. They settled in the gardens, Hiccup sitting on the soft grass while Toothless sniffed various flowers, badgered the gardeners for treats or watched butterflies with a fascinated look on his face.

Hiccup, under the shade of tree and with the morning breeze to keep him cool, opened his notebook on an empty page and bit the edge of his pencil. He wanted to draw something... something special. He felt on the edge of a good idea, it just needed form.

It took him some time to figure out what he wanted to do, exactly. When he did, the basic outline of the scene playing in his mind began forming on the pages, in tune with the fond smile on his lips.

"And what's this?"

The voice caught Hiccup completely by surprise as he was squinting at the page. The pencil fell out of his mouth and he almost dropped the notebook among his knees, but held onto it at the last moment, and closed it immediately.

He looked up, flustered, at the person that had startled him. Queen Elsa was snickering at his expression, her lips parted in an amused grin. She was wearing an elegant white gown. It was glinting with... ice crystals? Her own personal touch, no doubt.

"Good morning, Hiccup."

He swallowed, a little harder than he perhaps should. What was he supposed to say? Good morning. By the way, I finally managed to deal with some of my issues. I think I've figured out where we stand. I'm still not sure what I think of you or of us, but at least I can say with some degree of confidence that my dead wife doesn't affect my feelings for you.

Yeah... that was probably not the best idea.

Lacking anything better to say, he went with: "Do you enjoy sneaking up on me?"

"Your reactions tend to be quite humorous, I'll admit. I wasn't

actively trying to be stealthy, though. You were just engrossed in whatever you were doing."

Hiccup grunted, returning his eyes down to the closed notebook. He patted the spot next to him on the grass, and heard the queen's irritated drawl.

"Why do I always have to wear white dresses when this happens?" she wondered to herself as she gathered her gown and lowered herself delicately to the grass, sitting next to him. "I hope it doesn't stain, or you're dealing with Anisa."

"Anisa being?"

"The woman in charge of my wardrobe."

Hiccup couldn't resist snickering at this. His gaze wandered around the peaceful gardens, still mostly empty but for them and Toothless.

"Laugh if you must," she said. "But she takes her job very seriously."

"As is proper. Gods forbid you dress yourself."

He did catch her smile on his peripheral.

"You mock, but I've noticed a distinct improvement on your overall image since you started delegating your clothing choices."

"It's nice to know you're keeping an appreciative eye on me."

She softly shook her head with a guffaw.

"What were you doing that enabled me to sneak up on you, anyway?"

Hiccup looked down at the notebook again, scratching his cheek with his free hand. He'd have to shave again soon. "Nothing important."

"Oh?" she asked, mischief evident in her tone. "is that why you're evading the question?"

Her hand entered his field of vision, closing the distance between them. She was going for the notebook! He held it up on his left hand, away from her reach as her hand followed his, ineffectually.

"Uh uh uh," he scolded. "No snatching."

She snorted in amusement, but retracted her hand. "You're just making me more curious."

"A fact I can live with."

"Give me a hint, at least?"

"You'll see when it's finished, no sooner."

The queen put a finger on her lips and hmm'd in thought. "You've

checked everything of note in the gardens weeks ago. Meaning this must be a piece of inspiration. Is it a gift, or something for yourself?'

Hiccup had to admit to being both impressed and surprised, at least a little bit. "Err..."

"A gift, then? Who for, may I ask?"

"Hey now, stay out of my head," he said, shaking his head. He heard her melodic laughter. It seemed surprisingly fitting in this serene environment. "I suppose, yes, it's a gift. For you."

She blinked, raising a perfect eyebrow. It'd been a while since Hiccup had seen her do that, and its effect was amplified because of this. He looked away and licked his lips.

"For me?" she asked.

"Yeah. Well, sort of. It'll make sense when it's done."

"If you say so. Do you expect something in return?"

The question was innocent enough. Playful, even. Still, considering what Hiccup was planning to make, it sounded wrong. He shook his head. "No. Not for this."

She shrugged lightly, accepting his response, even if she seemed a little confused. Hiccup found it quite cute.

She sat with him for another hour and they chatted. She told him of some matter at port that had kept her from coming to breakfast and they had a light conversation about Anna, Toothless, and Ruffnut. He was very careful not to bring up anything... delicate. She was doing the same, no doubt, intentionally keeping the conversation light. Now was not the time to discuss politics, tactics, wars or treason.

At some point, she mentioned having just finished going over the funeral arrangements for the lost soldiers before beginning her rounds and running into him. With pursed lips, Hiccup asked her when the funeral was and if he could attend, but she shook her head and informed him that funerals had been held last night at three different cities outside of Arendelle, the towns of origin of the departed. Hiccup nodded, offering his condolences once more.

The mood felt rather less carefree after that, and they lapsed into a contemplative silence.

Toothless was still keeping himself busy, Elsa was right next to him, and there was nothing official going on right now. Still, Hiccup did not know what to say about the situation between them. Should he say anything, even? Was that the kind of thing one just said? He didn't think so. At least, not like this.

Even so, he couldn't deny the tension between them. He could recognize it easily, now. Elsa was right there, sitting not a few centimeters next to him. All he had to do was turn just so, lean in just a bit, and-

He shook those thoughts out of his head. Yes, he had to figure

something out, but now wasn't the time.

Good thing too, because Elsa chose that moment to shift. "I should go," she said. "I need to get back to work. Thank you for your time, Hiccup."

"You needed the break," he said with a shrug as she carefully got to her feet and dusted herself off. "I was more than happy to oblige."

She smiled down at him. "You're right, that was nice. I'll see you later?"

He nodded. She did the same, before turning to walk away. He watched her go.

When she was gone, he opened the the notebook again and continued sketching.

~H~

He had lunch with Ernie, talking to the young man about his early years with his family, before heading off for a flight with Toothless, aiming to be back in time for another session of Court.

He was spinning in lazy circles around the castle, in preparation for his descent, when he noticed a figure down below, in the Courtyard, waving frantically up at him. The blond hair made him think Ernie, so he led Toothless in a downward spiral, eventually landing softly next to the young man.

Hiccup released his prosthetic, jumped down from the saddle and removed his helmet.

Ernie approached him, looking alarmed.

"What's going on?" Hiccup asked. He'd never before tried to signal him when he and Toothless were flying. Something must have happened.

"Court for today is cancelled. The Queen has sent for you. It's urgent."

Hiccup's eyebrows met his hairline. He had expected something, sure, but it still caught him by surprise.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," the young man replied, frustration evident on his posture. "But I'm to lead you to the Queen immediately."

Well, Hiccup was not one of the Queen's underlings and refused to just be fetched like a proper vassal.

"What's this about, now? Shouldn't I get changed or something, first?"

"Please, Hiccup. Just come."

Hiccup let out a sigh, before turning to Toothless and giving him a rub on the snout. "Wait here, bud. I'll see what Elsa wants and then we'll resume, yeah? Be right back."

Toothless crooned in a way Hiccup understood as agreement and rumbled away, curling around himself in a shady corner of the Courtyard.

"Lead the way," Hiccup said, turning to Ernie, even though he knew the way to Elsa's office well enough. The younger man nodded at him and headed inside, Hiccup right behind him as he tucked his helmet under his arm. Might as well see what this was about, rude summoning or no.

No less than five guards were arranged outside Elsa's office. Hiccup didn't outwardly react, but he did straighten his posture, placing the helmet more securely under his arm. He wished he'd taken Smoker on his way out.

He was announced and let inside. To his surprise, Elsa's desk was surrounded by people, most of them obviously part of the armed forces, as well as her inner council, excluding lady Gertrude.

The presence of the Commander General on Elsa's immediate right was not lost on him.

Hiccup looked at them all and they looked at him, as he approached. Elsa finally looked up at him when he came to a stop. The differences between this Elsa and the one from that morning were striking. Her hair were caught in a strict bun on the top of her head, and her expression was grave, calculating.

"You asked for me, Queen Elsa?" Hiccup said, choosing not to express his irritation at being summoned like one of her subjects. He was making concentrated effort to cut back on the political snark.

Not to mention, he was curious. Something had obviously happened, if the top brass of Arendelle all gathered together like this. The question was, what was he doing here?

Elsa nodded at him. "I did, thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Well?"

She pushed a paper across the desk, towards him. "This came a few hours ago. What do you make of it?"

Hiccup eyed the paper suspiciously, yet still reached for it and brought it to eye level with his free hand, ignoring all the stares aimed at him.

It was an after action report, as far as he could tell. His Arendellian was still sketchy, but he managed to catch the gist of the document. His eyes scanned its contents several times. It wasn't too long, but what it described was worrying.

"When did this happen?"

"Two days ago, sometime after noon, as far as we can tell."

"Is what I'm reading here right?"

"it matches reports by other teams sent to the area after the fact, at least."

That... didn't make a lot of sense. The report described finding a small village, apparently near the north-eastern border, up in flames, and failing to rescue any of the locals or the buildings from the inferno. Such a fire could not be natural or simply an accident, they said, but the scout writing the report noted that there were no signs of an army nearby, or anything to show organized enemy activity in that area. No tracks had been found beyond a few leading to and from the nearby forest, which in all probability the locals had made.

It was as if the fire that destroyed the village of Frant had just... sprung up, all by itself, or as if the villagers themselves had set it, both of which were equally unlikely.

"How can this be?"

"We don't know," Elsa said, lips pursed and fingers clasped around each other. The whitening of her knuckles betrayed the tension that her words didn't. "That's why I asked for you. Perhaps we should approach this from an angle you know better than we do."

Hiccup frowned, thinking on her words. There was only one thing he obviously knew better than all of them did. His eyes widened.

"You mean dragons?"

She nodded after a beat of hesitation. Hiccup directed his frown at the Commander General. The bald man was staring unflinchingly at him, and did not shy away from the viking's look. Hiccup fought hard to stop his expression from morphing into an outright glare. Instead, he directed his furious look back at the Queen. Did she really think so little of him, still? Was this all it took to break her trust in him?

"After all that's happened," he began, "Are you seriously accusing me of-"

"No, Chief Hiccup, that's not what I'm saying," she cut him off, before his tirade well and truly started. Hiccup forced himself to relax, before he said something else that he might regret later. He should give her the opportunity to explain.

Seeing him quieten, Elsa continued. "Of course, none of us believe that you had anything to do with this."

Hiccup did not miss the hardening of the General's expression. Obviously Elsa was lying on at least that account.

"The fact remains, however, that dragons is the least unlikely cause for this disaster. We simply do not know how else a fire so extensive and quick could break out. People literally did not have time to get out of their homes, and an arson of this caliber would have surely left evidence behind."

Hiccup absorbed that. "I know nothing of this," he said. "None of my people are even in the region, not since Ruff left, and I can guarantee that it wasn't her."

"I know," she said. She hesitated for a moment, wetting her lips. "I'm asking you for help."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes at her. True, he had offered his help to her. He had admitted that this was the only reason he stayed. But he had said this to her, personally. Not to... all these people. He trusted Elsa, he didn't trust her administration.

"And whose idea was this request?" he asked her, knowing very well she would understand his meaning.

He could see the muscles of her jaw tense. She chose to ignore his question. "As the only person we know experienced in the affairs of dragons, we'd like you to fly over to the site and look for signs that might indicate dragon presence."

Hiccup said nothing. They stared at each other for a few tense seconds, before Elsa blinked and rubbed her eyes with her left hand, letting out a soft sigh.

"Leave us," she ordered. Her voice cut through the silence of her packed office, yet no one moved. She raised her head again, glaring at the people around her. "Out," she ordered again. "All of you, out."

Finally people started to move, walking around desk, passing Hiccup and exiting the office, throwing wary glances behind them. Hiccup locked eyes with the frowning Commander General as the older man passed by him, but he did not turn to follow him with his eyes.

A minute later, they were alone. Elsa remained seated in her chair, looking down on the papers at her desk. She brought both hands to cover her face, rubbing at her eyes with the inside of her palms.

She looked... vulnerable. A part of Hiccup whispered at him that she could be faking it... but he doubted it.

"Elsa?"

She brought both hands over her hair, making sure nothing was out of place and sniffing once, before turning suddenly tired eyes at him.

"You told me you stayed for me," she told him suddenly, faster than he expected, making him blink. "You said you wanted to help me. Did you mean it?"

His mind whirled, but he felt as if he was trying to walk through mud. All he could see was her.

"I did."

"Then help me. No one knows dragons like you do. Help me explains this," she said, waving at the paper he still held.

"The General -"

"Damn the General!" she cut him off with a shout, her right hand lashing out at a poor inkpot. it flew until it met the wall, where it broke in hundreds of tiny, frozen pieces.

Elsa was glaring at him now. "This isn't about him, or about you, or about which one of you is right. Don't you see, Hiccup? This -" she waved at the papers on her desk. "This is bigger than me. Almost three dozen people were lost. The whole village burned to death. The only reason we know of it is because the smoke drew the border patrols. Innocent people, Hiccup," she said, only now did he see how much this whole thing haunted her. Her eyes, her expression, the slight shaking of her fingers, they spoke of a person barely holding back from just screaming.

"Not soldiers," she continued. "Civilians. The situation was dire before, but now it has escalated to an unprecedented level. A war with Grandland is almost unavoidable, now, unless we manage to properly explain this fire."

She slowed down, controlling her breathing better and lowering the volume of her voice. "I'm well aware of your misgivings regarding my General," she said, giving him a sharp look, one he returned with equal force. "That's why I fully expect you to pull out the moment you feel threatened. You and Toothless are fast, faster than anything I've ever seen. There shouldn't be anything out there in the mountains that could get the drop on you. Go to the site, see if any wild dragons were involved, then return. That's all I'm asking."

This was a lot to take in. Hiccup pursed his lips as he processed all that he had heard. Truly, dragon interference would have been his first guess, too, and he supposed that he couldn't blame her for turning to the only dragon expert she knew of. What would he have done if he found one of Berk's villages destroyed, down to the last man?

The thought alone made him clench his fists. Such... senseless loss of life. He could not let this go and not interfere. If he could help somehow, he would.

"I'll go," he decided, giving her a nod.

She visibly relaxed, slumping ever so slightly and releasing the breath she'd been holding. Hiccup could tell that she was teetering on the balance. She reminded him a lot of himself, near the beginning of his reign. Situations such as this truly tested a leader's mettle. And stomach.

"When?"

No time like the present. "Now." Besides, if a dragon was really responsible for this, he'd have to hurry if he hoped to catch their trail up in the mountains. A day or two had already passed.

"Thank you," she breathed.

"Don't mention it. I did promise. And I would go, regardless."

"Again, thank you. And keep your eyes peeled. I'm well aware of the leaks in my castle. At the first sign of an ambush, fly straight out of there."

"Right," he left the paper at her desk. She still wasn't looking up at him. Hiccup wasn't very good with people, but he felt like he really shouldn't just go, without a word of comfort. Whatever good it did, coming from him.

He leaned forward on the desk, taking her left hand in his right. She tensed and he thought she'd pull away, but her fingers curled around his like a lifeline.

"Keep it together, Elsa," he said. "We'll get to the bottom of this, you'll see. You can do this."

"I wish I believed that," she whispered.

"I'm a good judge of character," he said. "I know how you feel right now so I'll spare you the platitudes. You need to keep it together, though. For your people. Yeah?"

"I know. Okay."

"I'm going now. I'll come straight to you when I'm back."

"Be safe."

He walked around the desk and put a hand on each of her shoulders. She was still hunched over her desk, so he had to lean quite a ways down to place a soft kiss to the top of her head.

Nothing else was left to be said. He grabbed the map indicating Frant's location and left the office with crisp, hurried steps, pausing only for a moment outside the door, addressing the people who were waiting outside.

"She said to take a ten minute break," he told them. "No one is to enter before then."

His piece said, Hiccup left down the corridor, hoping they'd take his advice and give Elsa some space to collect herself.

Ernie fell into step next to him, though he had to almost run to keep up with his long strides. Hiccup was thankful for the young man's presence.

"I'm going to the border," he said. "I need supplies enough for two days. Can you catch me at the Courtyard with them?"

"Of course." With a nod, Ernie broke from his side, heading deeper into the castle, towards the storerooms and the kitchens.

Hiccup continued toward the Courtyard. He met Anna along the way, furiously ascending the stairs on the opposite direction than him. The princess was breathing hard, obviously having run the many staircases until this floor.

"Hiccup? Is Elsa okay?"

"Got to her," he said. "She needs you right now."

"Truly?" she asked, the worry in her eyes intensifying. "In that case, perhaps you should also..." She trailed off as Hiccup shook his head. No, he had no right, not to mention the ability.

"This isn't the time, Anna. I need to go. Elsa will explain. Help her."

She looked confused, but obviously not willing and sit and talk about it. "Right." And she continued past him, her hurried steps echoing down the marble hallway where the carpets didn't cover.

He continued down, eventually reaching the ground floor and heading outside to the Courtyard.

He called out to Toothless, whose ears perked before he raised his head to look at him. At Hiccup's wave, the Night Fury bounded over to him, being at his side within seconds.

"We have something important to do, bud. You'll need to go fast, okay?"

Toothless' growl was comforting, in a way. The dragon was ready, willing and able.

Hiccup spent the five minutes until Ernie showed up double-checking their equipment. Hearing steps behind him, he turned.

He had expected the leather pack containing the supplies he asked for. He hadn't expected the young aide to hand him the sheathed Smoker, as well.

Ernie's expression was grave. Afraid, even. "Just in case," he said.

Hiccup nodded, tying the sword to his side. "Thanks."

He climbed on Toothless and they shot up the moment he connected his prosthetic, without preamble. There was no need for a show, and they were in a hurry. Toothless beat his wings and shot straight upwards, gaining altitude quickly. They levelled and headed northeast in their fastest maintainable speed, which had the fjord and the castle quickly vanishing from sight.

They covered in minutes distances that normally took people days, maybe even weeks, to cross. They passed mountains and valleys beneath them, but Hiccup only had eyes on the horizon.

At the speed with which they were going, it took them no more than three hours to reach the border, forty minutes of which were spent resting halfway.

They saw Frant well before they reached it. Rather, they saw the smoke coming from Frant. It was visible from miles and miles, forming its own dark cloud of ashes and cinder above the area.

Soon they could smell it, too.

"Go low, Toothless," Hiccup instructed, and they both adjusted to lose some altitude.

Frant was located at the foot of a mountain, right next to edge of the forest. It was a relatively small village, sustaining itself from organized hunting and trading lumber. It's position next to the border gave it just enough significance to not die out.

Hiccup had seen scenes like this several times before. That knowledge didn't abate the feeling of nausea in his gut any more than it had the previous times.

"By Thor..." he whispered as they got their first clear view of the village. Frant was still on fire. Even three days later, it had not died out. The area was heavily laid on with snow, yet the small, slightly spread out village was still burning like it was kindling. Most of the still active sites were just piles of ashes, coal and burning hardwood that used to be sturdy buildings, but it was still impressive. Hiccup could clearly discern the village's layout from above, even through the smoke. It was like a miniature town.

"Get us down, Toothless."

They landed on the village's main road, where the distance between the burning buildings was enough to safely come down.

Hiccup unlatched his prosthetic and jumped down, looking around at the dead community. He removed his helmet so as to see better, tying it to Toothless' saddle.

It looked more devastating from ground level, even if he could only see a portion of the actual destruction. The buildings around were collapsed in on themselves, any still solid piece slowly sizzling away with small fires. Very few buildings still had any structure to them left, but it was amazing that any of them still stood. This wasn't normal.

The smell of burning flesh was very faint, old, but Hiccup could still make it out.

He bent down to examine the tracks in the snowy road. "Toothless," he instructed his friends. "See if you can catch the scent of any dragons."

Toothless sniffed, then snorted, before growling.

"I know it's hard with all this smoke, bud. Give it your best, yeah?"

Toothless grumbled but nevertheless walked forward, nostrils flaring and tongue lolling outside his mouth as he tasted the air for signs of dragon presence.

Hiccup examined the frantic tracks. He recognized the Arendellian boots easily. The most recent tracks were from the patrols that had been here before him, no doubt. They split off, heading to various destroyed houses, no doubt having been in search of survivors.

The older, almost faded out prints were of the actual villagers. Those were over three days old, and the snow had almost covered them.

He saw nothing that he didn't expect. No dragon paws had been through the snow as far as he could see in the several hours he spent scouring the roads of Frant.

On the edge of the village, he spotted a group of tracks, not of the distinctive Arendellian leather boot, go to and from the forest in front of him. A group of lumberjacks, perhaps? The tracks weren't deep enough for him to be positive of this reading, but then again, they were three days old. He couldn't be sure about their validity.

He headed back towards the center of the village, spotting Toothless in the distance, sniffing at a burnt wooden post.

"Anything?" he shouted. Toothless barked in a rather irritated fashion, which Hiccup took for a negative and sighed.

"No trace of dragon gas in the air," he murmured, looking around at the carnage. "No paw or claw prints. Was it really dragons?"

He noticed one of the few remaining buildings. It was still on fire on several spots, and some corners had collapsed, but it still stood. He approached it, looking around for anything interesting.

The door, though burning slowly, remained closed. Hiccup looked to the side and noticed that the windows had been broken already, she opening the door shouldn't blast him.

Just to be on the safe side though, he stayed back, squared his foot, and kicked the door under the lock with all his might using his prosthetic. The half-burned wood easily gave way with a mournful creak, collapsing under the doorframe into little flaming pieces. Hiccup covered his face with his hand to protect it from the soot and any potential surge of air, though thankfully none of the latter came.

Morbid curiosity more than anything led him to carefully step foot inside the destroyed house. It wouldn't take much to fully collapse it if he weren't careful.

The one thing that became evident when he stepped inside was that the smell of burnt humans was much worse inside than outside.

Hiccup slowly navigated the burning building, looking for... he didn't quite know. He counted no less than four blackened skeletons on the bottom floor, and did not dare try the stairs. He frowned at one particular skeleton, slumped against the frame of a door, long since burned down. Across the door's ashes, two more skeletons lay, curled together. Those two were much smaller. Judging by the pelvic bone of the adult, she was a woman.

Hiccup deduced that the mother must have died trying to free her children from the locked room. What could have happened to bring such a situation about?

It took a lot of effort to keep his lunch in. What was he doing here, anyway? There was no sign of dragon presence. No signs of struggle, no damages that could be attributed to dragons, not a whif of dragon gas on the air or excrement around the area.

He turned around, intent on leaving the precarious building, when something curious made him stop.

He stood, staring at a tongue of flame rising from the remains of the stairway. Was it... that's not how flame normally moved, was it? Hiccup took a few steps closer to it. The flame, as if in response, bent out of its way even more.

Was it a trick of the air, that made the flame move this way? Perhaps. Hiccup extended a single digit and approached it to the burning stairway. To his fascination, the flame extended, as if trying to reach him. What peculiar bylaw of physic was making this interaction occur, he wondered.

He looked around the blackened hall. Perhaps he was just paranoid, but it wasn't just the flame on the stairwell... all fires seemed to be edging towards him, as if reaching for him.

... okay, now he was officially paranoid. And also completely spooked. He made a beeline towards the exit, stepping very carefully and making sure not to approach any of the flames more than he had to.

Finally stepping outside, he stretched his hands and let out a long exhale.

"Man," he drawled, feeling oddly uncomfortable. "That was freaky, and I have seen some shit."

Before he could placate himself any further, he heard a crack in the distance. He barely heard it but it sounded far away, so it must have been loud.

He looked to the left, trying to spot something between the burning buildings, smoke and snow.

"Toothless?" he wondered. He waited for a few seconds, but received no reply. He started taking a few steps down the road. Where was the reptile, anyway? He brought his fingers to his mouth and whistled, a long, drawn-out sound that should have notified Toothless if he was anywhere near the area - which he damn well should be.

"Toothless?" he repeated, louder. He squinted, trying to make something out, and cast his eyes about as he walked.

Then he heard it again - louder this time. A thunderous, wooden crash, not unlike a longship crashing against rocks, but fueled by the crackling of fiery sparks. It sounded much closer.

Hiccup narrowed his gaze on the direction from which the sound came.

"Now would be a good time to come out, bud," he said loudly, hoping the Night Fury could hear him.

Another sound, more cracking! It was coming from the building Hiccup had watched. It was half-collapsed and not all of it was on fire, some six houses away from his position. He stilled, not taking another step, as he traced the repeated cracking sounds with his senses.

Suddenly he heard a massive crack again - as Toothless burst through the wall of the building in a mess of limbs, broken wood and ash. The Night Fury spotted him, locked eyes with him for a single moment and then started running towards him at full speed, crooning in seeming panic.

"What's going on, Toothless?" Hiccup asked, getting well and truly alarmed now as Toothless sprinted toward him as if the fires of hell were right behind his tail...

The hole Toothless had burst out of exploded, spewing fire and wooden shrapnel everywhere as a wave of flame expanded from the small explosion. Toothless had cleared half the distance between the building and Hiccup and so was safe from the explosion, but it wasn't the explosion itself that made Hiccup's eyes widen and his jaw fall open.

The infernal wave of fire that decided to chase after Toothless rather than disperse as it should, was.

"By the Gods..." Hiccup murmured, frozen in shock as Toothless sprinted away from the massive fireball hurtling after him on all fours, barking madly.

Hiccup was shaken out of his stupor by Toothless' roar when the Night Fury was only a building's length away.

Just in time, too, because Toothless didn't stop when he reached him - instead he kept on running. Hiccup had expected it though. As the dragon passed, his right hand shot out and grasped onto a leather strap with snake-like precision, propelling himself over his friend's neck by using Toothless' own momentum. In one smooth, well-practised move, Hiccup landed directly on the saddle, his left leg already clicking the prosthetic in place and activating the mechanical tailfin.

"Go!"

Hiccup chanced a single look behind them as Toothless spread his wings and took flight - the wall of fire was still behind them. No, it was almost upon them!

"Faster!" he yelled, willing the Night Fury with all of himself to move. Toothless beat his wings like a demon of the night, and the buildings around them began to blur. They would surely leave the limits of the village before long-

A building in front of them exploded, unleashing another fireball, this time in front of them.

"Left!"

They turned, weaving among the burning buildings as the two massive fireballs collided - and yet still somehow seemed to follow their path. Hiccup unclasped his helmet with deft fingers and slipped it on, hoping it would shield at least his face against part of the searing heat. The flame was trailing a few meters behind them, but he could still feel its sting on his back.

The fire had gone higher than they had, and had overtaken them from above. Escape to the skies was impossible, now.

"Look out!" Hiccup yelled as a stream of white-hot fire was expelled from within a burning building to their left. Toothless flattened his wings against his sides and dropped, passing right under the flaming stream and spreading them again the second they had cleared it.

They swerved to the right to dodge another sudden gout of flame, weaving around buildings to stay one step ahead of the conflagration following them. Hiccup looked behind him once again, and almost instantly wished he didn't. He'd only ever seen something like this when the Red Death's fire was about to engulf him. What sort of creature could be doing this? What had they stumbled upon?

A sharp bark from Toothless forced him to return his eyes in front of them, and just in time to adjust the tailfin so they could avoid what appeared to be the burning remains of what must, at one point, have been a church.

They were finally running out of buildings to weave around. Hiccup eyed the expanse of white among the buildings at the end of the road with hope. Perhaps in open air they could lose the helfire.

Their reflexes were fast enough that the sudden gouts of flame coming from the buildings or piles of flaming rubble didn't hurt them, but they forced Toothless' flexibility and Hiccup's heat resistance to their limits, as well as limiting them from unleashing their top speed to escape the slower wave of flame.

A quick check confirmed his worst fears - the tailfin was smoking! He'd made it from special fire-resistant leather, but it probably couldn't take much longer of having the flame so close behind it.

"Go for the open air!" he instructed, spurring Toothless on as they dashed towards the edge of the village. They dove beneath a falling column of burning hardwood, only to be faced with a building collapsing in front of their path. Toothless brought his wings in on himself and spun. They broke through the destroyed window of the building and came out the other side, where the Night Fury unfurled his wings again. The fireball on their tail swallowed the collapsing building and only grew, catching up to them that much faster.

Hiccup nervously looked behind them, at the edges of the flame almost licking the end of Toothless' tail, almost reaching for it-

They broke through the edge of the village, shooting past the burning buildings and away from the flame. A spiraling torrent of flame detached itself from the inferno and surged after the two of them, in what appeared as a last ditch effort to draw them in. It gave up after four spirals, having just missed the edge of Toothless' wing, before withdrawing back inside the massive conflagration that had now overtaken the entire village.

Hiccup edged Toothless higher and rose, going above the treeline of the forest at the foot of the mountain.

Worn out from his mad dash, Toothless floated for a few seconds, catching his breath, while Hiccup looked around. He had seen such

incredible volumes of fire spewed before, and he had seen dragons with precise, almost miraculous control over their flames, but never both.

Goosebumps and a feeling of dread made him look towards the forest, below. There, among the trees some distance ahead of them, he saw something. A red glow, a spark, something. Then, a massive fireball - at least the size of anything the Red Death had ever thrown at them - was burning through the treetops on it's way to them.

"Go!" Hiccup yelled, spurring Toothless into motion, who complied, beating his tired wings with as much fervor as he had before, putting distance between them and the inferno.

Toothless saw it before he did and changed directions, an act that Hiccup supporting through sheer instinct and a perfect synchronization. The reason for the sudden shift became evident when he noticed that the wall of fire following them was expanding to the sides, trying to close in on them.

The fires from the destroyed Frant village rose up, as well, blocking out most of their avenues of escape. Toothless and Hiccup were forced to swerve and roll around tongues of flame that shot out at them from the main body that was still lumbering just around them.

This was hopeless, Hiccup could tell. While the smaller, more agile tongues kept them busy, the massive walls of flame closed around them. Soon they'd be completely enclosed within the flames, and from that point on it was a matter of time before they burned, not to mention run out of oxygen.

Coming out of another roll, Hiccup cast his eyes about for a way out of this death trap. He spotted it - a piece of blue sky, rapidly growing smaller and smaller as the flames surged to close around them.

Hiccup turned Toothless' attention to the small hole and together they surged, putting in as much speed as they could.

He knew they wouldn't make it in time. The rift was about to close completely, and they still had several seconds to go before they reached it, not counting the time it took them to dodge the fires shooting out at them.

The dome of fire was now completely closed around them and, by Hiccup's calculations, was also beginning to turn inward.

"Faster!" Hiccup shouted, urging Toothless to put his all into it. The Night Fury, trusting blindly, poured on the speed, beating his wings as fast as he could and rushing to meet the now solid wall of crackling fire in front of them.

The heat was getting unbearable, but he had to endure. He squinted, watching from the slits of his helmet.

"Wait for it," he instructed as they rolled above another gout of fire.

"Wait!" he shouted again, feeling Toothless anxiety and fear from the way his muscles coiled. To his credit, the Night Fury didn't budge an

inch out of his given path or drop a single knot of speed.

Hiccup waited with bated breath for the right moment, assisted by the fact that there was no more air for him to draw in.

They were almost upon the wall of flame now. It leaned in to meet them.

"Now! Blast it!"

Toothless released a blue-white ball of plasma with a challenging roar, shouting his defiance to the heavens as his fire travelled the small distance between them and the inferno and was lost inside it.

For a second -a terrible, heartbreaking second - nothing happened.

Then the plasma exploded, pushing away the wall's orange flames and any oxygen in its immediate vicinity, snuffing out the fire and creating a tiny window, a hole just big enough for them.

Toothless needed no urging and redoubled his efforts, flattening his wings against his side at the last possible second and beginning a mad spin, hoping to stave off the fire's crushing heat for just enough-

They burst out of the gigantic dome of flame singed, out of breath, but alive. If Hiccup had any breath left in him besides smoke, he would have whooped.

Toothless didn't let up, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the inferno they just escaped, and Hiccup finally managed to get some air in his lungs.

He looked behind them. The fires were mobilising. Slowly, but they were moving, the steady stream from the forest floor still producing more and more flames that were rushing at him and Toothless.

He had seen enough. "Get us out of here!"

They leveled, took a second to catch a breath, then blasted off in what must have been a new personal top speed for Toothless, breaking the barrier of sound within seconds.

The chief of Berk and his Night Fury turned tail and ran, as fast as they could.

~H~

15. Elsa 6, Act I

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~E~

A Chance Encounter

Elsa 6

Act I

~E~

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><p>Elsa would have liked to say that she waited anxiously, sitting by a window and staring off into the distance, hoping to catch a glimpse of Hiccup as soon as possible on his return. It would have been poetic in a way, and it matched her feelings accurately. She was, in fact, rather anxious.</p>

However, this was reality, and Elsa was no fairy tale princess. She was a queen whose kingdom was in the middle of a crisis. Time during which she could sit and stare off into the distance was time she could put to better use doing something else. She worried of course, aware that the possibility of danger was always present, but had to push it off her mind and focus on her work. Focusing on Frant was a bad idea right now. She couldn't afford another breakdown. She had to be strong, now more than ever.

Progress was frustrating and slow, each step forward marred by two steps back or another confusing step to the side. The sudden loss of Frant, while not particularly damaging to the economy itself, had spread rumors and panic like wildfire. Elsa gathered the people of Arendelle in the palace's Courtyard, trying to give an accurate yet reassuring speech to cull any further panic. She explained the need for vigilance and military readiness, while reaffirming her vows to protect the kingdom and her subjects.

When that was done, she hurried back to her office, where she had to field literally dozens of correspondences, too sensitive to be handled by others. Foreign royals throughout the region, regardless of their relationship, had sent her missives with inquiries, requesting assurances, details, or other such intrusive things that she didn't really have the time to deal with right now.

After that, she was forced to take a break by Anna, who barged into her office and basically commandeered it, ordering food and beverages brought in. Elsa offered only a token resistance, feeling her exhaustion settle deep in her bones the moment she stood still for a bit. While they dined, Elsa stole looks outside the window, hoping that things were simple enough that she could spend several hours simply waiting, without having her kingdom come crashing down around her.

She must not have been as discreet as she thought.

"He'll be alright, you know."

Elsa swiveled her head to look at her sister. She didn't bother pretending she didn't know what the redhead was talking about. Instead, she released a heavy breath.

"Toothless is fast," Anna noted with a smile. "They'll be back before you know it. It's not that risky, right? The area was empty and besides, Hiccup and Toothless would wipe the floor with anyone stupid enough to attack them."

Elsa choked on her water, caught completely by surprise. She was reduced to a pathetic combination of coughing and laughing as she tapped her chest to encourage the water down the right passageway.

"Aptly put," Elsa noted once she got her breathing in order. Still the humor returned to her in bursts, eliciting short snorts and chuckles from her, while Anna guffawed openly.

Yes, Anna was probably right. There wasn't much reason to worry. That empty feeling in her stomach, that sensation of dread creeping in the back of her mind was the result of her overactive imagination and worry over the man she'd come to love, nothing more.

She stole another look out the window, but spotted nothing on the horizon.

The break wasn't to last. Soon, she had to return to her work, and Anna to her own duties. As a princess, it was also her responsibility to appear strong for their people, to talk to many as the Queen's representative and heir. Lately, Anna had stepped up to the plate, anything that might help lighten her sister's workload. Elsa was grateful.

There was another strategic meeting held that evening, though not as large as the one Hiccup had been summoned to. While waiting for the viking chief's findings, they retreated to the map room, discussing where an enemy force could be hiding. Arendelle had both mountains and forests, and wasn't too densely populated. While the soldiers were well-trained, they weren't numerous enough to cover all ground. It was possible that the enemy was inside the borders already, in numbers much higher than the few spies they knew had slipped in.

The meeting was inconclusive, as none of the people present could construct a proper image out of the scattered reports they could verify. Elsa left her office feeling like someone had poured molten lead in her skull. She barely had the presence of mind to undress and wash before crawling into her bed. She was asleep before her head had touched the pillow.

Elsa was awoken suddenly by a shaking sensation, her eyes snapping open and a gasp leaving her mouth. Feeling unknown hands on her shoulders, frost instinctively formed around her palms as she started to raise them.

"It's me, sister."

She knew that voice. Elsa squinted in the darkness of her chamber. Anna's hair glinted in the starlight coming from the balcony glass doors.

"Anna?" she mumbled, the frost sputtering before vanishing altogether. Her sister nodded. "What's going on?" Elsa slurred, feeling like she'd gone to sleep only moments ago. Perhaps she had. She didn't feel at all rested.

"Hiccup is back," Anna said. Elsa's eyes widened momentarily and she blinked, processing the information through hazy thoughts. "He's asked for you."

"Is he okay?"

A touch of hesitation. "He looked fine."

Elsa sat up in her bed, resting her back against a bundle of pillows. She brought a hand up to rub at her loose hair. "What time is it?"

"Late. Or early. I'm sorry I woke you, but Hiccup insisted."

"Can't he just ~~â€~~ wait?" Elsa just wanted to close her eyes. Couldn't everything just ~~â€~~ wait until morning?

"I think you should see him, Elsa. It sounded like it was important."

Apparently not. Elsa groaned, running her palms through her face in a frustrated gesture she didn't often utilise. Her mind was beginning to work now, sluggish thoughts giving way to clarity as she woke up.

"Give me fifteen minutes," she mumbled. "Then send him in. I'm not getting out of my room."

Anna squeezed her shoulders. "I understand. I'm sorry. Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Yes please."

With one final squeeze, Anna let her go. Elsa heard her steps as she walked towards the door, pausing only long enough to ignite a lamp, bathing the room in soft light. Elsa shielded her eyes with a groan and missed Anna's exit, hearing only the door click as it closed.

A trio of servant girls came in, one carrying a small tray, giving their Queen sympathetic looks. Two of them helped Elsa wash, more or less tame her hair and get in a dress in a timely fashion, while the other prepared tea on the coffee table situated through a door on the opposite wall. The small room also had a couple of comfortable couches, small wooden chairs next to the coffee table and a great view of the outside.

It was there that Elsa sat, legs crossed, sipping her extra sweet cup of tea when Hiccup found her. Her eyes immediately fell on him as he entered the room and was illuminated by the lamps and candles.

He must have come directly to her. The first thing she noticed was that he still wore his riding gear. The next thing she noticed was that it was rather frayed, filled with soot, and smelled quite a bit like ash and burned leather, making her scrunch her nose slightly at the unpleasant smell. The third thing she noticed, the one that gave her pause, was the expression on his face.

Any word of greeting she might have been thinking of uttering died in her throat at his alarmed, nigh panicked look.

"What happened?" she ended up blurting instead as she all but jumped to her feet, poise, grace and exhaustion forgotten as she rushed to his side and took hold of his arm at the shoulder. "Are you alright?" Her eyes took him in, searching up and down for any signs of injury.

Besides blackened spots here and there however, he looked fine, if troubled.

"I â€“ yeah."

"Sit, please." She gently pushed him to a chair, sensing that he was troubled, confused, tired and maybe a bit out of it. She poured some tea into a cup and carefully put it in his hands. She took a small towel and used a nearby sink to wet it. She waited until he'd sipped a couple of times before reaching for his face with the towel, gently cleaning it from soot and ash.

Satisfied with the outcome and that he was diligently drinking his tea, she pulled her own chair a bit closer and took her own cup in her hands. She made sure not to stare at him too much, giving him time to work through his thoughts. She'd seen it in his eyes, staring vacantly ahead, not focusing on her. He was thinking of something not in this room, and he looked terrified.

Something which, the longer Elsa took to think about, was reason enough for her to start getting scared, too.

"Hiccup?" Her prod pulled him from his thoughts, focusing his eyes on her own.

"I don't know exactly what happened," he admitted, and Elsa frowned. In the short time she'd known him, nothing had stood out more than Hiccup's keen analytical mind. He was able to paint a clear picture of her capabilities and take her apart with frightening ease. He had become accustomed to Arendelle and learned to navigate its political climate in a very short span of time, not to mention his pioneering engineering skills. To have him this unsure of something he'd lived through was telling in itself.

"Take it from the beginning," she suggested.

"We reached Frant after a few hours of flight," he said. "It was empty, but it was still burning. There were still many active fires, which was weird, right? We searched the area. We didn't find any sign of dragon presence beyond the fire itself. No gas residue, no claw marks, no paw prints. I didn't notice any signs of assault or invasion. It's as if Frant just â€“ up and burned by itself."

He paused, brow set in a frown, idly drinking his tea.

"Then I started noticing the flame. It seemed to move. I thought it was just my imagination at first, but I noticed it again. The next thing I know, me and Toothless have to escape a literal wave of flame, exploding towards us, hunting us. Flame was everywhere. It was coming from the forest, it was covering the area, trying to corner us. At some point, flame was all we could see. We barely managed to escape." He paused, taking a few shaky breaths. "We were undeniably attacked, Elsa."

Elsa kept her reaction to a mute widening of her eyes, listening to Hiccup's tale.

"What does that mean?" she said, voice lower than she perhaps wanted.

"I don't know. I've never seen a dragon able to do something like this. I know of a kind of dragon able to produce this much amount of flame, but they are huge and I would have seen it if one was around. I also know of a species capable of controlling flame to a much smaller extent, but I know of nothing that could do both. It almost—" He paused abruptly as he pursed his lips. He turned his troubled gaze to her, green eyes piercing into her own.

"It almost felt like fighting you," he said eventually.

Elsa's breath hitched.

"I'm sorry I woke you," Hiccup continued. He set his empty tea cup on the table as he rose to his feet. "But I couldn't wait until morning to tell you this. There is something threatening you, something neither of us expected. I don't know what it is, but it changes everything."

And he was gone, giving her a curt nod and a whispered goodbye before he retreated from the coffee lounge. Elsa heard the soft click as the doors to her quarters closed behind him.

She spent the next five minutes on that chair, trying to process what Hiccup had told her before she gave up. She was too tired, her mind too slow. She kept going around in circles. Getting some sleep was the best thing she could do right now.

'... some say the world will end in fire._'

Hopefully this would all make more sense in the morning.

~E~

The next day, it did not make any more sense.

Elsa woke up a bit later than normal. It took her a while to realise this, as she noticed no differences while getting washed and dressed. When she arrived to the breakfast room to find it empty save Anna, she began to suspect.

"What did you do?" she questioned her sister.

"I gave you something of a lie in," she replied, sticking her tongue out at Elsa with a cheeky smile. "Just a couple extra hours. Today feels like you'll need it."

Elsa let out a sigh as she sat on the table next to her. "I wish you hadn't," she said, shaking her head. She was happy for the extra rest, but the work wouldn't go away if she just ignored it.

Anna pointedly did not ask anything, instead making light chatter that successfully kept her mind away from worrying, at least for the duration of breakfast.

The rest of morning did not go as peacefully. The situation had thankfully not escalated in the few hours she had been sleeping, but it hadn't gotten better, either. Worrying reports were coming from all of her provinces. The recent military readiness she had ordered had tightened security across the kingdom, calling in reserves and

increasing drilling schedule in the standing army in preparation for hostilities.

The recent increased security had resulted in a plethora of reports regarding unidentified movement within her borders. The enemy was already here. Elsa just had to find them.

She was alone in her office for most of the morning, trying her best not to claw out her hair. Only a lifetime's discipline stopped her from rash actions. She'd faces crises before, but never one of this nature or scale. On top of enemy movement, this new unknown threatened to further disrupt the peace of her people.

She didn't see Hiccup for most of the day. She was busy, she always was, but he lingered on the back of her mind. Like there was something she left unfinished, something she had to do. She relayed his report to her ministers and her council.

They didn't like the implications. The possibilities were many, and none of them good. If the Chief himself wasn't certain that the culprit was a dragon, that meant that either it was and it was a species he wasn't aware of, or it wasn't and something else and potentially worse was afoot.

That particular meeting had ended nowhere and served nothing but to frustrate everyone involved. They didn't know how to take countermeasures against this new threat, but neither could they just completely ignore it. In the end though, they were forced to resume normal operations, lacking information and a feasible to get it. They would continue as they had with trying to prepare for and repel the enemy invaders while pinpointing exactly who sent them. If the fire-starting menace showed up again, they'd see what they would do then.

Not a very likable plan, but probably the only one available right then. That didn't mean that anyone liked it.

The possibility that the Chief lied was brought up, inevitably, but Elsa crushed it down as soon as it was uttered. She had seen his expression, heard his tone. Hiccup had not lied, and she wouldn't let anyone think otherwise.

Anna all but dragged her out to lunch. Elsa had planned to have some food brought up to her office, but her sister had none of it. Kristoff also ate with them and Elsa was glad to see him. The official Ice Master might not have been a politician of any sort, but Elsa trusted him and valued his company. Watching him and Anna interact brought a smile to her face and energy to her tired limbs. She had few friends, and a third of them were family while the other third was a recent addition that had quickly proceeded to change categories again.

Trying to classify Hiccup wasn't very easy.

After dinner, Elsa took an hour to herself to rest. It wouldn't do to burn herself out. A quick nap revitalized her, while washing and braiding her hair brought a sense of calm and detachment that she would need to maintain all evening were she to function properly. She chose a blue dress, elaborate but not terribly impractical.

Court was held a bit earlier that day, and Hiccup was noticeably absent. She couldn't afford to stop Court at a time like this, not when both foreign and domestic people needed assurances. Alliances and good relations were necessary now more than ever. Even so, the empty chair reserved for the viking chief seemed to draw her eye much more than it should.

She left the throne room in the company of her guards, feeling weighed. She would have liked to stop for the day, but there was still work to be done, so she headed to her office. When she reached it, one of the guards outside the door turned to her and bowed, seeking permission to speak.

"What's wrong, trooper?"

"A message for you, my Queen."

Elsa offered her hand, palm up, and accepted a small piece of paper. She closed her hand, thanked the guard and headed into her office, closing the door behind her.

She opened the paper after sitting in her chair.

'_We need to talk soon. Hiccup_'

Whatever it was the Chief was doing, it probably wasn't fun or relaxing. She called one of her guards inside, instructing him to let Hiccup know that she could see him at the end of her workload, which would be sometime after nine in the evening.

Most of the evening's work was correspondence, along with various reports from the city of Arendelle and the castle itself. With the recent turmoil she hadn't had as much time to make her rounds around the castle, but she still wanted to be informed of day to day runnings, so she kept in touch with madame Gertrude's people. Perhaps not as eye-catching as the hide and seek with the foreign invaders, but no less important to Elsa's eyes.

So focused was she in her work that it took her a while to realize that someone was knocking at the door. When she raised her eyes from her desk she was surprised to see that it was dark. A servant had lit candles and lamps around the office, but the sun was well and gone outside. She'd overdone it again.

"Come in," she said, rubbing her eyes with a groan.

"Easy there, eyes are useful."

Still with eyes closed, Elsa smiled upon hearing his voice. That nasal tone was particularly suited to delivering deadpan one-liners. She removed her hand and looked at him as he entered, the door closing behind him.

Hiccup looked better. He was wearing a simple green Arendellian tunic rather than his riding gear, and he wasn't covered in burned leather or ashes. He still hadn't shaved but even though Elsa would never admit that, she thought that it rather suited him. He was giving her a smile.

"Hello Hiccup," she said, trying to discreetly stretch her back.

After so many hunched hours, it was rather stiff.

"I know that look," he said, expression sympathetic. Elsa gave a hum of agreement in reply. From someone less refined, it might have even been a grunt.

It was easy to lose the rigid persona when she was alone with Hiccup, for many reasons, not the least of which was that he understood her, even though they hadn't know each other for that long.

"Are you about finished? It's getting somewhat late."

Elsa looked down at the papers she was working on. No, she wasn't finished, but she was probably done for tonight.

"We can go. Unless you'd rather we spoke here?"

"I think getting out of the office would do you good."

She accepted his reasoning and got up off the chair. As she expected her back was sore. She felt only a little undignified in stretching a bit. She and Hiccup were well past the point of keeping up appearances.

When she walked out of the office with Hiccup in tow, her guards began to fall in position around her but she waved them away.

"Take the rest of the night off. I'll be safe in the Chief's company."

The guards gave Hiccup uncertain looks.

"My Queen," one said, "the General's orders were-"

"The General answers to me," Elsa noted. "As do you. Thank you for your zeal, but you are dismissed."

"Of course, your majesty."

They bowed and left, leaving them alone except for the guards stationed outside Elsa's office at all times.

"Let us go," she said, leading Hiccup down the hallway and up. Near the living quarters there were balconies. At this time of day the view of the lit up city and harbor would be great.

Their way wasn't barred by anyone. At this time of day it wasn't too surprising that they didn't ran into anyone, but Elsa suspected that Marina might have had a hand in this. Even now, her Head Courtier followed her orders. Good. Now would be a terrible time for a scandal against her reputation.

Still, it was good to see him. To be absolutely certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was okay. That he was healthy. That the trap he'd walked into on her request hadn't hurt him. It put her mind at ease.

When they reached the balcony they leaned against the railing, rather than sit on one of the benches like other times. They were silent for a few minutes, looking down at the view. Perhaps they simply enjoyed

each other's presence, perhaps they dreaded breaking the silence, fearing the conversation that would replace it. Elsa herself could not rightly tell.

Eventually, she could stall no longer. "You wanted to talk to me?"

His content expression faded, replaced slowly by a set jaw and grim eyes. He tapped his fingers on the marble railing.

"I did. It's about yesterday. About the mission to Frant."

Elsa let out a sigh. "I am truly sorry about the danger I exposed you to. If I had known—"

"That's the thing though, isn't it?" he cut her off. "You didn't know. Someone else did, though. Elsa, I was expected. Yesterday was an ambush. Someone knew I was coming."

She frowned. The thought had crossed her mind, but she didn't really want to entertain it.

A memory came to her. An insidious smile under half-crazed eyes. '_Soon, the dragon will be dealt with_ he had said. '_And you'll be next_.'

Elsa repressed a shiver at the memory. "Many people could have known."

Hiccup let out a noise of frustration, turning fully towards her. "Really, Elsa? That's what you're going with?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"It was his idea that sent me there, wasn't it? His plan."

"That doesn't mean he orchestrated the ambush on you!" Elsa replied, her own frustration rearing its head and mixing with her indignation.

"Oh come on!" he exclaimed, running his right hand through his hair. "What will it take for you to accept it? Will you believe it's him after I'm dead? If they manage to get me out of the picture, you're next."

Elsa brought her hands to her mouth, agape in horror. "Don't talk like that!" she scolded. "Don't ever talk like that. You're not going to die."

"We're both going to die unless you stop hiding from what's right in front of you!"

"There is no evidence that Shad is the traitor."

"Everything points to him! He's been consistently part of the few who knew everything they needed to know to arrange everything. He stands to gain the most. It's his ideas that make these situations happen. Just because we survive doesn't make them any less threatening. One of them is bound to succeed."

"Leave, then!" Elsa exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air in frustration. "If you're so worried about your life, if you're so against my decisions, then leave! You owe me nothing!"

He was glaring at her now, fists balled and shoulders shaking.

"I can't do that," he ground out through clenched teeth.

"Why?" Elsa challenged. She wasn't even sure herself why she was encouraging him to leave, especially after fighting to keep him here for so long. But it was like a dam had broken within her, and she wanted to _know_.

"I just—"

"_Why_, Hiccup?"

The moment happened too quickly for her to process. His hands found their way to her shoulders, gripping intensely and almost painfully, before his lips were enveloping hers. She felt the movement of his mouth on hers, and it took her a second or two to realize what was happening and react. Her arms were held so she couldn't bring her hands up, and their height difference meant that he was hunching over her. She bent her back to give him better access and soothe some of the pressure he was putting on her. She wanted nothing more than to wrap her arms around his neck, but as it were she could only show her feelings through the kiss.

His breath tasted slightly of mint.

A few seconds later he stopped assaulting her lips, bringing his hands higher from her shoulders to her cheeks and the back of her head. He stared at her, and she could see the conflict in his eyes.

"I can't," he repeated, voice low and breathless. "I can't just leave you to die. Not after figuring it out. Not after realizing how much you mean to me and how much you've helped me accomplish."

Elsa looked at him, and found him confused. His eyes were locked on hers, searching, hoping. He was nervous.

A small, content smile found its way to her lips. She brought her hands up, slowly encasing his own and taking gentle hold of them. She placed one on her hip and the other on her shoulder blade, before taking gentle hold of his tunic and drawing him to her.

Once their lips were once again locked, this time in a slower, gentler manner, she wrapped her hands around his neck. His hand on her hip sent electricity up her spine and excitement coursing through her. She flushed herself against him, wanting as much contact between them as possible.

Somehow, she knew. She knew what Hiccup was just short of saying. It was the only thing that made sense, and it made her heart flutter like never before. Hiccup was too unsure of himself to say it, but she knew.

And it made her next decision all the easier.

There were a thousand reasons why she shouldn't do this. Because despite everything, Marina was right. This would be a mistake. She was the Queen and she had duties and responsibilities to fulfil. But this was an entirely selfish decision.

Hiccup freed her mouth and headed northward with his lips, first through her chin, then up to her left earlobe before continuing down and to her neck. Elsa's breath hitched and she let out a low moan at the sensation.

Just for once, damn her kingdom, damn the crisis encroaching on her people. Damn Marina and her lectures and damn her duties and responsibilities.

She pulled back, just enough to signal Hiccup to straighten up as well. He looked at her, askance, green eyes filled with a wild passion that no doubt was mirrored in her own blue ones.

"Come with me," she whispered. She saw confusion in his eyes for a split-second before realization dawned. He gave her a nod, and her hand found its way to his palm, fingers interlocking gently.

She guided him through the hallway, just short of running, unable to contain the energy within her. Hiccup easily matched her pace with his longer strides.

They met no one on their way to her quarters, even the guards had been cleared. Sparing no thought to that fact, Elsa wasted no time in opening the door, shoving Hiccup through and - for the first time in memory - locking it behind her.

She attacked his mouth again as he backpedalled towards the Queen-sized bed.

Just for tonight, damn everything.

~E~

When Elsa awoke she noticed several unusual facts before she even opened her eyes. The first thing she noticed was the feeling of being naked under the covers, something very unusual. Secondly, she noticed her weird position, one she wasn't used to.

When at last she opened her eyes, she realized the third but no less important fact; she wasn't alone.

As her head was resting on his left shoulder, Elsa could only see his chest, atop which her left hand was splayed. His own was wrapped around her shoulders, and his breathing was slow, steady, indicating that he was still asleep. Her hair, free from her usual braid, covered her shoulders and back and painted a good portion of the bed's left side platinum blond.

Elsa smiled into his shoulder as memories from last night became clearer and clearer. Idly, the fingers of her left hand began softly caressing his chest, her manicured fingernails finding and tracing the scars that she'd asked him about all that time ago in the bathhouse.

To wake up like this, disheveled and naked at his side every morning

â€œ she could get used to something like that.

She didn't know how much time passed before something changed. Eventually, she saw the rhythm of his chest shift and heard a large intake of breath just outside her vision. A few seconds later the arm that was wrapped around her moved, pulling her closer and further on top of him. Elsa went along with it with a small chuckle.

From her slightly higher position she was able to turn her head and look him in the eyes, even as her fingers continued their soft exploration of his chest. Her hair, unchecked, fell around her face, framing her in morning sunlight.

Hiccup looked peaceful. His green eyes were looking into hers, a content smile resting on his stubbled face.

Neither of them talked for what felt like a long time. Eventually, Elsa broke the silence.

"You love me." It was a statement, not a question. Now, more than ever, she was sure that she knew Hiccup. She knew that he would never do this, he would never go that far, unless he was absolutely certain.

"I do," he said with a small nod. Elsa smiled again. However sure she might have been, confirmation was always nice.

"And I love you."

"I should hope so," Hiccup said, his mouth splitting into a humorous grin. "Otherwise this would be rather awkward."

Elsa swatted his chest without any force, eliciting a laugh from him.

Silence reigned again. This time, Elsa felt it different, more weighed. There were things that should be discussed, and she didn't think she'd like the outcome of that. Nevertheless, it was a beast that should be tackled.

"What are we, Hiccup?"

She spoke softly, and combined with the time Hiccup took to reply, she was beginning to think that perhaps she had not been heard. When he did reply, his voice sounded strained.

"What can we be?"

And that was the impossible question, was it not? Never mind what they wanted to be, what could they be? All the reasons this might have been a mistake flashed through her mind; not because she regretted anything, but because the future had never looked this uncertain. She found herself clutching onto him, a sudden fear gripping her heart and making her feel what she assumed was cold. In response, Hiccup tightened his own hold around her.

"You're the smart one," she whispered. "You're the one who always has a solution ready, you're the one with the crazy ideas that always work. Can't you figure this out? Because I- â€œ I can't."

"Come with me," he said.

She looked up at him. "What?"

"Come with me. It will be dangerous considering there's a war going on, but you can handle yourself and I would also do my best to protect you."

"Why does it have to be me? Why do you instantly assume that I am the one who should leave everything behind? Are my duties less important than yours? Is that what you think?"

"I didn't mean it like that," he said with a shake of his head. "I'm sorry."

Elsa sighed, realizing that she was being unfair.

"Why can't you stay here?" she said instead. "Stay here, with me."

She saw the pain in his eyes and for a moment hope fluttered in her chest, only to be crushed in the next instance as he shook his head.

"There's nothing I want more than to make us two work, but I can't. This â€‘ this isn't about me, or my desires. It never has been."

Elsa could not, in good conscience, blame him for that. Was she not the same?

"Is there really no one capable to succeed you, back home?"

Hiccup considered his answer for a few seconds.

"There are some that would perhaps do well in the short-term," he allowed, "but none that could bring my dream of peace to fruition. The only one who understood and shared the full extent of my vision was Astrid, and she's gone."

Perhaps it was a sign of how much she trusted him that all she could feel about that was sorrow.

After a minute or so, she spoke.

"Anna is not ready," she said. "Truthfully, I doubt she ever will be. I'm not sure I want her to be, either. Being Queen would change her, in ways I don't ever want her to change, and there's no one else. I, too, have a duty to my people. I spurned it once, out of insecurity and fear, but never again."

Hiccup let out a heavy sigh.

"I will trust your judgement on that. This does, however, bring us back full circle to the original question. What can we be? I'm not seeing an easy answer."

Elsa bit her lip, trying to stem back the tide of disappointment and panic.

"Is there *really* nothing?" she asked, voice trembling for a second before she reigned it in. "One of your ideas, perhaps? You're so creative... Is there really nothing *crazy* for you to do?"

Hiccup sighed again, bringing his free hand up to rub at his eyes.

"I think you're giving me too much credit, here."

"Hiccup!"

"There's so much I need to do back home," Hiccup admitted. "I'm already straining the limits of my conscience by being away for so long. There's a three way war going on in the archipelago that I have to deal with before I can complete my vision or think of anything else."

Elsa's eyes widened. "A three-way war?"

He nodded, face somber. "Myself and the united viking tribes are one side. The second is Drago Bludvist. A murderer, a slaver. He tortures dragons and binds them to his will, using them as nothing more than expendable tools, and would do the same to all humans and dragons in the archipelago alike if given the chance. He *must* be stopped."

"And the third one?"

"A densely populated dragon nest, led by a human. Nothing is known about him, but what he and his alpha dragon want is complete separation between humans and dragons. If they had their way, all of our dragon friends would be forced away." Hiccup snorted. "And to think, I was once called a traitor to my race. If ever there was one, it's this 'dragon master'."

Elsa listened to him with rapt attention. This was more information that he'd ever shared before and the picture it painted wasn't pretty, indeed.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I will win," he said simply. "Peace and unity in the viking archipelago *I* will achieve it."

He spoke softly, but his jaw was set. Elsa both saw and felt the intensity in his words. He was entirely committed to this goal, and it made her love him all the more.

She could be no less honest with him after all that.

"I'm not just being stubborn," she said, closing her eyes and letting the feel of him sear itself into her memory. Something not at all hard to do, after last night. "It's not enough. Even after all this, I can't have the Commander General arrested without concrete evidence. I am keeping him watched, though."

Hiccup sighed. She both felt and heard the rumbling in his chest as he released the heavy breath. It was a new experience for her.

"I realize now," he said, "that your fate is not in my hands. Perhaps it never was."

His tone was not bitter, just forlorn. Wistful. Elsa shared the sentiment.

"I'll be careful," she promised.

"I can strain my conscience for one more week before I have to leave to return to my people," he said. "Gods willing, I might yet be of some use in that time."

"Thank you."

She felt him press a kiss to the top of her head, and she smiled. Just for a while, for a night and a bit of morning, all was well.

~E~

It was not to last, of course. The dream eventually stops when reality comes knocking. Elsa had to prepare for her duties and Hiccup had to return to his quarters undetected.

Thankfully, they were both early risers, and did not sleep in or waste too much time in the morning. Elsa was washing in the bathroom and when she came out, it was to the sight of Hiccup on her balcony, leaning on the railing. He seemed to be following something with his eyes but he did notice her. He gave her a cheeky smile, before vaulting over the railing and vanishing from her view, jumping from one of the castle's tallest balconies.

Elsa had a good idea of what he'd done but still her heart constricted, making her run to the balcony. As she leaned over it, the black shape of the dragon Toothless soared a scant meter in front of her, making her jump back in surprise.

Hiccup waved at her from the dragon's back as he guided them to his own balcony, a few floors below and on the other side of the castle. Elsa had half a mind to throw a bolt of frost at them, but the smile on her face betrayed her.

She returned inside and went about her day, feeling strangely energized. Despite the somber nature of their words and conclusions, the excitement of finally seeing eye to eye with Hiccup and consummating those feelings did not fade. It dulled, as the reality of the country's situation and demands sank back in, but it did not vanish.

There was a tense interaction with her Head Courtier, around noon. Marina had come in, as part of the inner council, but her disapproving glances were not lost on Elsa. No doubt the older woman knew what her Queen got up to last night and with whom, and did not approve. Elsa did not care, as long as the woman still did her job and followed her orders. She'd get over herself soon enough. Thankfully, the woman was wise enough not to confront her sovereign on the matter.

There was one person she could not intimidate into obedience, however.

The moment Anna walked in her office that evening, all smiles and giggles, Elsa knew she would regret this conversation.

Anna wasted no time in walking around Elsa's desk and up to her.

"Anna, what-"

"Hush, get up." The redhead gave her no time to respond, taking hold of her arm and hauling her off her chair.

"Anna, this is highly-"

"Come, come!"

Anna dragged her to a nearby couch and all but pushed her down on it, before sitting next to her and taking hold of her right hand in both of hers. She was looking at Elsa with wide eyes and a massive smile on her face.

"Tell me everything!"

Elsa looked away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Anna snorted, the sound turning into an amused giggle. "Don't give me that! You and Hiccup! Last night, you two-"

"Stop it right there!" Elsa cut her off, unable to stop her face from turning beet-red. Thankfully, she still had her head turned away.

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine." Despite her embarrassment, that made her frown a bit. It wasn't completely true.

"Then how did it go?"

Elsa did not answer, the silence that stretched surprisingly loud by itself.

"Were you ever disappointed?" Anna ventured, voice meeker. "Was it not what you thought it would be? Did Hiccup-"

"What? No!" Elsa asked, swiveling her head to throw a surprised look at Anna. "That's not it at all! That part was..." She couldn't complete her sentence, embarrassment overcoming her brief surge of courage and making her face red again. Her free hand curled around her stomach. Memories of last night brought that bubbly, happy feeling to the surface once again.

"It was amazing," she ended up saying, eyes locking to some spot on the floor or the wall opposite her, anything but her sister's eager face.

Anna squeezing her hand was enough to draw Elsa's gaze. Despite her embarrassment, a big part of her dreaded yet looked forward to her sister's reaction to all this. Anna was her only family, the person she trusted and loved most. Everyone else she could disregard; not

Anna.

Anna's eyes were wide in wonderment and fascination as she stared at her. Elsa wondered exactly what it was that her sister saw in her face that would make her react like this.

Her expression also made Elsa wonder. There were many rumors floating about regarding her and Kristoff, some nastier than others. Elsa had never asked her directly, and Anna had never told. Could it be that Elsa, in fact, managed to overtake her sister in the one area she never thought she would have?

Her thoughts were interrupted when Anna suddenly threw her arms around her and pulled her in a fierce hug. Her laughter reverberated inside her office.

"I'm so happy for you, Elsa!"

Elsa smiled in her sister's red hair as Anna's chest shook with her laughter. Anna had known about the issues between her and Hiccup. She understood just as well as she did what this move on Hiccup's part meant. Her happiness could not possibly approach Elsa's own, but it was nice to know that her sister shared the sentiment.

When Anna spoke next, still in the hug, her voice was lower, almost casual. "I have to say, though," she said, almost as if her previous laughter and happy mood hadn't happened, "you gave it up way too easily, you scarlet woman."

Elsa drew back, feeling the keen sting of hurt in her chest, unsure of what she would say against Anna's words but unable to just bear it silently-, and then she noticed Anna's expression. The redhead was barely restraining herself from laughter and when she saw Elsa's reaction she could hold it no longer, breaking out into amused giggles.

"Oh, your face! Priceless! You should have seen your face, Elsa!"

Elsa scowled. "I think a brat-shaped ice statue would fit well with my office's decor. Are you volunteering?"

Anna ignored her, her expression suddenly turning somber. Seeing this, Elsa blinked, the quick switch catching her by surprise.

"But then," Anna began, "what's wrong?"

Ah. Elsa pursed her lips. What to tell, exactly? How to explain the short but intense discussion Hiccup and she had about their future, or the lack of one?

'Tell me everything', Anna had said.

So, Elsa did.

~E~

She didn't see Hiccup for the rest of the day. Apparently the viking spent most of the day in the harbor, more specifically the shipyard, grueling the shipwrights there on building and repair operations. It

was just as well, as Elsa herself was rather busy and had a hard enough time keeping him out of her mind without having him in the same room. She slept quickly and restlessly. Thankfully, her handmaidens never once mentioned the fact that they'd been ordered by the princess to stay away last night and this morning. Elsa was thankful.

The next day they met, very briefly, in breakfast. What with two council members also being present, they didn't stray further than polite conversation, but it was comforting in its own way. Hiccup had a unique view of things that was both ambitious and pragmatic that was helpful in many regards.

Most of the day she spent in her office, with the exception of a short couple hours that she took around her castle. She'd neglected making her rounds and checking up castle activity herself lately, so she made it a point to do so again.

Throughout the day she studied the reports regarding both enemy movements and Arendelle's own preparations. The raising of Arendelle's armed forces was proceeding according to schedule, but it was the enemy sighting reports that worried her. There was still not a positive identification on the origin of the invaders, but they had been seen enough times that it was almost certain they were Grandlandians.

The hiring of Grandlandian locals to cast suspicion on the country was a possibility, but this type of operation required organization and coordination that no small bandit group could achieve. Reports also indicated that they were fully armed and with good equipment, something only a real military force could provide in significant numbers.

They'd been growing steadily bolder, too. Small skirmishes had begun to break out between Arendellian regulars and groups of invaders, all of them within her borders and perilously close to the capital herself.

The city of Arendelle was safe. As safe as could be, at least. A frontal assault would never work, not with the army mobilised, Shad's recent addition of siege engines and Elsa's own presence, so the end-game of these invaders was still a mystery. They had taken to razing small farms, settlements and abandoned outposts and playing hide and seek with her soldiers.

It was all quite frustrating to watch play out. Because that was all she could do. Watch. She was the top of the pyramid, receiving everything and doling out orders, but she did all this from the safety of her castle. Others saw to it that her orders were completed, others struggled to present her with reports that helped paint a broader picture.

Elsa had never particularly felt like she should be out there. She understood the necessity of her work, and been trained since birth to one day be Queen. It was all she knew. But it still felt like too little, to sit and wait and give orders, hoping that she hadn't made a mistake while others risked themselves by trusting her.

Never had such a crisis befallen her kingdom during her rule. Never had they had skirmishes this often, never had they been threatened

with war while she was either a princess or a queen. This was new territory for her.

Anna was a whirlwind of activity, picking up the slack created by Elsa's increased workload, being everywhere and talking to everyone at once, even holding Court in her stead. Her bright personality helped assuage the fears of many, and distract many more who worried. And if some of that positivity and exuberance was faked, they'd never be able to tell the difference. Elsa knew.

She was informed, later that evening, that the viking chief had spent his day among the castle's garrison. He'd taken to discussing some dragon species and sharing advice on the treatment of severe burns and how to better make equipment resistant to fire. She had already received a report from her quartermaster on the ingenuity of the chief's ideas, and had given the enthusiastic man permission to begin implementing them immediately.

Everyone was helping, in their own way. Everyone was trying their best. Elsa could do nothing less.

She did see him make an appearance during Court, hair scruffier than usual but thankfully perfectly clean. The dragon Toothless was, as usual, napping behind Hiccup himself. Even now, after so long, the sleeping dragon drew glances from Courtiers and shocked looks from visitors. It made the whole ordeal slightly less trying, less boring, not to mention the prestige it granted Elsa's Court. She knew that many were coming from far away merely to see the dragon. It was another in a long list of things to be thankful for.

After Court was dismissed she waited in front of her throne rather than leave through the side door like she usually did. Getting the hint, Hiccup approached her, giving her a respectful nod and calling her by her title, seeing as there were still Courtiers trickling out of the room, some not even trying to hide their curious looks.

It seemed surreal. After all they'd been through, after all they'd done together, they still had to call each other by these informal names and titles. It was a somber reminder, but Elsa didn't let it deter her. She gave a bright smile.

"Chief Haddock, good evening," she replied. "Word has reached me of your work today. It is much appreciated."

He nodded in acceptance. "I had a conversation with the princess Anna earlier." Even through his perfectly controlled expression, a shade of a grimace was let through, Elsa felt for him. Her sister could get rather $\ddot{\epsilon}$ intense, at times.

"Indeed?" she asked, exaggerating her surprise. "That does sound like a tale I'd much like to listen to."

"It would be my honor and ever such embarrassment to share it, if you so wish."

"I do," she confirmed with a slight nod, "but I find myself still with duties to attend to for a few more hours, leaving me with little time for such conversations."

His brow furrowed in genuine confusion. That was understandable, but

it was still cute to see the usually so smug viking try to make sense of her. It brought another smile to Elsa's face.

"Unfortunate," he said in lieu of anything else. "Perhaps I should stop keeping you from your duties, then."

She nodded again. "Having said that," she took a half step forward as she spoke, bringing them closer and lowering her voice, "perhaps you would like to share the story with me later, once my responsibilities have been seen to." A half-second's pause. "In private?"

She could practically see the gears of his mind working as he made sense of what she said and her body language. It didn't take him long to figure it out.

He raised an eyebrow. "If that is truly your wish."

"It is."

"I would not want to bother your security detail again. They might grow irritated with me."

"Perhaps a man of your unique talents can find alternative means of approach, ones not requiring the displacement of the guards stationed outside my door and in the hallway?"

Hiccup looked surprised at her suggestion, but nevertheless nodded. "I'm sure a solution may be found in time."

"Excellent," she said with another bright smile, taking that half-step back and raising her voice again. "Thank you very much for your cooperation, Chief Hiccup. I hope you have a nice evening and night."

"You as well, Queen Elsa."

He bowed his head slightly once again as a sign of respect, before turning and leaving, the dragon Toothless close by his side. Elsa watched him go until he turned the corner.

Perhaps making such arrangements so early was not the best idea, Elsa realized. It was increasingly hard to concentrate on her work, and anticipation made time crawl by at a snail's pace. She could have sworn that a whole day passed by the time she was finished, rather than just an afternoon.

When she was finished for the night, however, she couldn't leave her office fast enough. The sun was long gone; her work had not lessened from yesterday. The possibility that Hiccup had already gone to bed crossed her mind. She wouldn't blame him, but she hoped he hadn't. She now understood the folly of not specifying a time.

She arrived in her quarters, bade goodnight to her guards and handmaidens and - now alone - locked the door behind her.

She surveyed her room from the door. Perfectly clean and cared for, the cleaning staff were as competent as always. Her nightgown was laid out for her, and the towels looked fluffy and inviting.

She grabbed a lamp from her desk and lit it using a match. She

unlocked her balcony door and stepped outside. The night was dark, the moon barely visible up in the sky, but the stars were impressive. Arendelle was lit but silent below her.

She set the lamp on the balcony railing, confident that the wind wasn't strong enough to knock it over. She walked back inside, leaving the door ajar.

She took her nightgown and went to the bathroom. Even though she'd sent her handmaidens away, she still enjoyed her bath. She didn't stay to soak, instead choosing to wash herself quickly and dry her hair as best she could using a towel.

She spent a minute or two staring at her reflection in the mirror and washing her mouth. Unmarred skin, blue eyes and pink lips stared back at her. Her hair was wet, sticking to her neck and flowing down her back. She wore nothing but a fluffy bathrobe. She had none of the poise that her elegant gowns or elaborate braid or make-up granted. When she looked in the mirror, neither sorceress nor queen looked back. Like this, she was just a woman, as tired as anyone after a long day's work.

She thought she picked up some sort of sound from outside. Rather than be alarmed, she smiled. With one last look in the mirror, she ignored her nightgown and walked out of the bathroom, still clad in the bathrobe.

She saw him, as she'd hoped and expected. He was leaning against her balcony's railing next to the extinguished lamp, enjoying the view and breeze, his dark blue tunic fluttering lightly. She didn't know how he'd made it to her balcony, but it mattered little.

His back was turned to her but he must have heard her steps or the door, for he turned as soon as she exited the bathroom.

His eyes taking her in, going from her still wet hair to her bare feet, sent an excited shiver down her spine. She walked around the queen-sized bed, positioning herself between it and the balcony door, but moved no further.

A delicate finger beckoned him closer.

The intense expression on his face was a fascinating sight as he entered through the open door and closed it behind him. Elsa stepped backwards, undoing the fluffy belt of her robe as she did so, her coy smile drawing the viking chief ever closer until there was no more distance left between them.

The promised story was left forgotten.

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16. Elsa 6, Act II

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Elsa 6

Act II

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><p>Waking up next to Hiccup for the second time felt about as good as the first. Despite the secrecy both practiced, it made the start of her day rather brighter. He was well and gone by the time her handmaidens entered, and if the young servants noticed anything amiss, they kept their silence.</p>

The day was a whirlwind of activity, as the previous. More reports flowing in, more worried citizens and dignitaries to placate, more military plans to go through and authorize.

There was no midnight visit that night, much to her disappointment. Hiccup had sought her out and explained that he would need to remain by the side of his draconid friend that night. Elsa wisely kept her tongue, though acid burned in her thoughts for a few seconds regarding his pet beast. He'd had Hiccup for over five years, all to itself. She'd had a measly two nights. Still, she understood that she was being unfair, unused as she was to being denied things she wanted, so accepted his reasoning with but pursed lips.

He made it up to her the night after that though, and her complaints were gone before she had time to properly form them.

Exploring her relationship with Hiccup was almost enough to make her forget what was happening around her. She could, if she'd tried, ignore the increasingly worrying meetings and reports, the increasing stress that being queen carried, and the heavy feel of the atmosphere. Like something was building. Like things were coming to a head.

Even with that wonderful distraction now in her life, Elsa was not fooled. She'd sworn off denial years ago, and wasn't about to start now. The bad feeling, the sense of dread deep in the pit of her stomach had not vanished. As the week progressed, it only got worse.

It was five days after she had first shared her bed with Hiccup that the stressful stalemate was finally broken.

She was in her office when it began. She was reviewing some papers when an officer all but burst into her office, unannounced. After the first, half-panicked and vague report, Elsa instantly sent the summons for her war council to convene in the map room.

She went there first, opening a map of Arendelle, one much more detailed than one would find among the citizenry.

Soon, the top brass started trickling in, until the room was nearly full with either officers or guards. Most anyone of military rank was present. Elsa raised her eyes when the Commander General came, and the two exchanged crisp nods.

"What do we know?" she asked into the room, her voice steady in the respectful silence.

"The attack was a complete surprise," a younger officer replied. He must have been the one who sent the messenger to her. "The installation's defenses were overwhelmed in minutes."

"What's the situation right now?"

"From what we can tell, there's maybe two or three dozen of them in the engineering installation. After clearing the guards, they went straight for the storage facilities."

Elsa frowned. "The warehouse of the disassembled war engines?"

The man nodded. "From records, all the machines that had been crafted so far, meant for various outposts and cities, were stored in there."

"How many in total?"

"About a dozen functional engines, my Queen."

Elsa's growl of frustration was drowned by the murmuring of the brass around her.

"Silence!" she ordered, a soft glow of frost on her right hand enough to direct everyone's attention to her and obey her command.

"What are they doing with them? Are they being transported away?"

Another man stepped forward, this time older. "We've surrounded the installation with all nearby troops. From what our scouts could tell, they're actually assembling the machines on the spot."

"Why would they do that?"

"It seems they mean to use the facility as a defensive position."

Elsa's brow creased further with the complications. "Is that viable?"

"With this many war machines in strategic positions, I'm afraid so."

Elsa took a second or two to gather her thoughts. Then her gaze swept the people in the room. "Gentlemen," she said, "I need not explain to you the danger of having an enemy stronghold this close to the capital. What are our options?"

The Commander General took a step forward. "Our best option right now would be to surround them from a safe distance and wait them out. Surely their supplies will run out sooner or later."

One of the other officers addressed the General. "But what if they use the position and our distraction to facilitate an assault? It'd be easier for them to breach our borders en masse if they have men and a stronghold on the inside. We can't just let them have the facility."

"But a direct attack on entrenched siege engines would be suicide!" another one chimed in.

The room erupted into chaos as people started arguing back and forth. Elsa herself stared at the map. The siege works installation was several kilometers away from the city of Arendelle, but it was sufficiently close that such an open offensive move was both shocking and worrying.

To think, the installation had been recently revitalized as a proactive measure after Hiccup's reveal. Those engines were meant to discourage dragon attacks. Now, they were being used against them. Was this punishment for their hubris? Warmongering had never been Elsa's way, and she'd had a bad feeling about this from the start. Nevertheless, she had authorized this. The blame lay solely on her.

Her thoughts raced once again. On second thought â€‘ she wasn't the sole person responsible. She had given the final word, but this hadn't started from her.

"I will have order in this room!" she shouted, and her glare was enough to silence most, which drew the attention of the few that hadn't, until silence reigned once again.

She felt the weight of responsibility on her shoulders, and it was heavy indeed. Every eye in the room rested on her, waiting for her orders. She was expected to resolve a situation that she didn't know how to deal with. Letting the enemy control a heavily defended area near the capital was insane, but so was ordering an attack on such a fortified position.

"How did this happen in the first place?" she asked in the silence.

"My Queen?"

She didn't look up at the person asking the question, her clenched hands on the table in front of her.

"How did this happen? How did they know about the facility? How did they overwhelm security so easily?"

"We â€‘ don't know. It shouldn't be possible that they managed to mount an attack in such numbers undetected. They knew exactly where to strike and how to enter. I have no explanation for this, my Queen."

"I do," she murmured, ignoring the younger officer and instead turning narrowed eyes at Shad Mertok, who looked steadily back at her.

"How many people knew of the installation and its purpose?" she asked.

"Several, my Queen."

"How many people knew of its defensive measures and guard patterns?"

"Less, but still a few over the chain of command."

"And how many people had access to the assembly plans for the machines?"

"Some mechanics and some in the upper echelons."

She nodded along, she knew this already. "And how many people knew all three of these things?"

This stymied the General, whose mouth opened and closed again. His brow furrowed in thought.

"The people with enough authority in enough areas to know all of these â€‘ three people, my Queen."

Elsa nodded again, her hard stare never leaving him. "I am one of those people," she noted, "you are the second."

"Your Majesty, surely you're not implying-"

"Where is the third, General?" she cut him off. Her words made him blink in confusion for a second. "Where is Protector Divisive Vren?"

Heads turned and murmurs erupted among her officers as they tried to find the Divisive among them. They couldn't. Elsa had already noted that the man was not here. Her eyes never left Mertok as he, too, cast his eyes about.

"Where is he, Shad?" she asked him.

His gaze returned to her, and he looked anxious, if only just a bit. "I don't know, your Majesty."

"Tell me now, General," she said, her eyes hardening, Hiccup's words echoing in her mind as fury welled within her. "Tell me now while you still can. Where is the Divisive? What are you planning?"

"Planning?" he asked, eyes widening. "I don't know where he is, but surely there is a reasonable explanation for-"

"Guards," Elsa interjected, "arrest this man."

Everyone held their breath for a second, shock evident in their expressions. The guards were the first to snap out of it, urged by their Queen's direct command, and moved in on the General.

"This is a mistake, your Majesty," Mertok said as the guards reached him and tied his hands, "this is not the time for such drastic measures."

"Save it for your trial, General," Elsa shook her head. She had to put things in perspective. She couldn't let this get personal. Even she, no matter how much she wanted, could not ignore the facts. She couldn't consider or second-guess herself now.

"It's the dragon boy, isn't it?" Mertok accused. "Don't think I haven't seen. He's the one who poisoned your mind with these

outrageous ideas, isn't he?"

Elsa well and truly glared at him. "I have heard enough of you. Guards, take him away while we search for his accomplice, and make sure—"

She didn't get to finish her sentence, as at that time the floor beneath them and the walls around them were rocked, as if by a sudden earthquake. Her ears registered the sound of an explosion, muted and distant but still evident as the very castle itself shook.

When she spoke, her voice was exasperated and ever so slightly shrill. "What now?"

A few officers and guards exited the room in a hurry, leaving the rest of them inside to wait. The tremors stopped. A second, more muted explosion was heard. Then, silence.

A minute later, a pair of guards came back in.

"The castle is under attack, my Queen. Infiltrators on the lower levels. Many. Multiple engagements with the garrison."

Elsa's eyes widened. An outright attack on her castle, in the heart of her territory? Absurd. Nay, impossible.

After her first impression of these news, the gears in her brain started to turn. The full implication and danger of the situation didn't take long to dawn on her.

"What are you waiting for?" she addressed the brass in the room who were, even now, watching her. "Go to your posts. Gather your men. Repel them!"

There was a chorus of agreement followed by a scramble as everyone left, leaving her with her guards and a pair of officers of the Royal Guard, including the Commander of her guard himself.

"You all," Elsa said, her gaze going over the remaining guards in the room. Seven of them surrounded her. "With me."

"My Queen," the Commander of the guards interjected. "It would be safer if you stayed here. We can guard you more easily in your office."

Elsa gave the older man a harsh look. "I am the Queen of Arendelle, Commander. I'll be damned if I stayed cooped up while we're under attack. Come with me, and take him as well. We'll escort him to a cell pending his trial."

Leaving no room for arguing, Elsa exited the map room, the guards rushing to follow her, dragging the bound Mertok along.

When they left Elsa's office and entered the hallway the guards arranged themselves around her. The Commander and two others were walking ahead, keeping an eye open. The fighting had not reached the upper levels yet, but they would take no chances. Behind Elsa was the bound Mertok, surrounded by the rest of the security detail.

As they walked and headed to the lower levels, Elsa's ears caught the

sound of fighting from below. The clanging of weapons, the screams of the wounded and the yells of the fighting. Her hands clenched.

They met few people as they were on their way, as most guards had already headed down below and the servants were hiding for their own safety.

Two levels down, Elsa's mouth opened in surprise after they rounded the corner of a hallway.

"Olaf?" she asked before she registered the desire to.

"Queen Elsa, such a joy to see you safe!" the little snowman exclaimed from the other side of the hallway as he rushed towards them.

When Olaf got closer Elsa's eyes widened. His own personal storm cloud was beginning to cover it, but the snowman's right was colored red, and the stick that served as his right hand was bent at an angle. Elsa had the sinking feeling that that wasn't paint.

"What happened, Olaf?"

"Terrible, terrible stuff, Elsa! Oh, why did this happen, why did-"

"Focus, Olaf!" their group had reached the snowman by now, and Elsa kneeled down to be on his level. The little man looked anxious, and the blood on his side was more evident than ever. Olaf shook his head, throwing off some snow in the process.

"Right, right. I was going to get help! I was helping him walk but he couldn't move anymore so I thought I'd find someone and-"

"Olaf! Who?"

"Oh, sorry. Chief Haddock, of course."

"Hiccup's hurt?" she asked before she could stop herself, voice shrill and eyes wide. Her hands held onto Olaf's head. "What happened? Is he okay? Where is he?"

"He was fighting a bad man, but I gave him a nice whack! He was losing a lot of this," he pointed his stick hand at the blood on his side, "but he was conscious last I saw him. He's three corridors down. I couldn't move him anymore so-"

"Take us to him!"

"Oh. Right, you count as help, yes? Right this way!"

Olaf started running back the way he came, and Elsa followed along with the guards, wishing all the while that the snowman was taller so he'd move faster. The guards shoved Mertok until he matched pace, keeping in the same position in the group.

"He's through here!" Olaf exclaimed when a corner came in sight. "The left side!"

With this knowledge, Elsa and her guards overtook Olaf, leaving the

little snowman lagging behind as they hurried.

Elsa was the first to turn the corner and what she saw made her stop in her tracks, her limbs freezing in place in shock as her guards fell into place around her once again.

She saw Hiccup. He was leaning heavily against the wall, halfway across the corridor. His tunic was painted red in patches, and Elsa could see blood stains on the wall and the floor, evidence of his attempts to drag himself onward. There was just so much blood.

He had a knife stuck on his right shoulder up to the hilt, and another through the palm of his left hand. The way he was standing completely still, the only sign of consciousness was the fact that he hadn't dropped to the floor just yet.

Elsa heard the yell and it took her a second to realize that it was her, screaming his name in horror.

Several things happened in a short span of time.

His eyes fluttered open at the sound of her voice and widened in recognition. His eyes flickered to something behind her, and his body spasmed with effort as he shouted her name in warning, voice panicked. "Elsa!"

She heard the telltale sound of crossbows being armed at the same time as she sensed movement behind her, hearing the heavy, rushing steps of someone pouncing. Mertok was right behind her!

She turned instantly, hands gleaming with frost and magic, but she didn't make it in time. The Commander General slammed into her with his whole mass, and there was nothing Elsa could do but fall, disoriented from the hit and the drop, magic dispersing from her hands.

She'd been too slow. Too slow in suspecting him, too slow in arresting him, too slow in stopping his rush against her. She was going to die here, crushed under the weight of the man she'd foolishly trusted beyond all reason, probably with a hidden knife shoved in her side, all because she was too weak to do what she should have done long ago.

The General was a big man, even in his old age, and his full weight bore down on her as he landed awkwardly on top of her after having tackled her to the ground.

"Protect the Queen!" she heard the voice of her Commander of the guards shout, wrathful and terrible, but it seemed as if far away.

The knife that Elsa expected never came. After a few seconds of no piercing pain, she opened eyes that she had instinctively closed, and sound rushed back to her. She heard the noises of fighting in the corridor, the cacophony of steel on steel and shouting, though she couldn't see its source.

She felt wetness trickle down to her, but she didn't have time to think about it. Mertok's weight on top of her was smothering her, almost cutting off her ability to breathe. He wasn't moving at all,

which made finding a hold possible. She pushed, as hard as she could. She shouted with the exertion, but she did manage to push the unmoving Mertok off of her and to the side.

She took a deep breath, trying to bring her senses and her mind back in focus. She tried to sit up and scramble a few steps away from her traitorous General, lest he attack her once again.

Her eyes locked on Mertok. The wetness that she'd felt earlier seeping through her dress was blood. His blood. Face down as he was, Elsa could see two crossbow bolts lodged into his back.

She raised her eyes, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. Her guards were fighting each other and she was unable to make them out individually with their identical uniforms.

Her thoughts were frozen, her brain mute as she tried to process what she saw and what it meant. Mertok had rushed and tackled her, but his hands were still bound and he hadn't stabbed her with anything or tried to hit her. In the span of time that between tackling her and hitting the ground he had been shot twice.

Had Shad just ~~saved~~ saved her?

She crawled the meter separating them, limbs trembling. She touched shaky hands on his shoulder, uncertain.

"Sha-... Shad?"

No reply. She reached with her hands under his arm and heaved, trying with great effort to turn the much bigger man. She managed to bring him to his side.

"Shad?"

There was a small stream of blood from his mouth, joining the small puddle that was beginning to form around him. His eyes were glazed over. Unmoving. Unseeing.

"No no no no ~~no~~!" She kept repeating denials under her breath, trying to find a sign that he wasn't gone, that he wasn't dead.

Shad had saved her. Shad had shielded her with his body and taken the bolts that would have killed her he had saved her he wasn't a traitor he was innocent!

She took his head in her lap, trying through eyes foggy with tears to find a sign of life. There was no denying the glassy look in his eyes, or the lack of pulse on his neck that Elsa tried to feel in between chest-wracking sobs. Her trembling fingers failed to find anything. Shad Mertok was dead.

Elsa's cry of anguish was supernaturally loud. All around her, glass frosted before cracking into a million tiny pieces, and the people still standing close had to stop what they were doing and shield their ears from the magical onslaught. Frost slithered across the walls unbidden, freezing anything in its path, turning everything parch white.

When Elsa stopped her incoherent scream, she realized that the

fighting around her had stopped.

Five of the guards lay dead, killed by their fellows. The only ones remaining were her Commander of the castle guards and another. Both were injured, but not severely. Elsa directed furious eyes at them even through her tears, one bloodied hand raised with frost forming all around it.

"My Queen, wait!" her Commander implored. Both of them let go of their dripping swords, letting them clatter to the ground, before raising their hands in a pacifying gesture.

"We are loyal, your Majesty," the Commander said, putting his life in her hands. Elsa turned her eyes to the other guard, a younger blond man.

"Now and always, Queen Elsa," the man said, meeting her gaze steadily. Elsa idly noted that he was bleeding from a cut on his stomach.

"And them?" she asked, nodding towards the dead guards.

"Treasonous filth," the Commander said, anger rising to his voice as he spat on the ground.

"Except him," the younger guard said, kneeling by the side of one of the bodies. "He too was loyal, my Queen."

"... thank you," Elsa said, turning her eyes back down at Shad's corpse. Her fingers clenched around bits of his uniform as she rocked ever so slightly back and forth, trying to come to terms with all that had happened.

Perhaps if she hadn't had him arrested, he would be alive right now. Perhaps if she'd been more effective, all of this could have been avoided. If she'd only-

A hacking cough derailed her thoughts. Her eyes widened. Of course!

She turned, rising to her feet on shaky limbs, and ran as fast as her half-ruined dress allowed her towards the form of her viking lover. A sickening trail of blood marked his slide against the wall to his current position, sitting on the ground with his back propped up against it. He was bleeding from a few wounds, the most severe of which being the two knives stuck to his body. Olaf was by his side, but the little snowman couldn't do much.

She'd lost Shad today. She'd be damned if she lost Hiccup too.

She knelt by his side, and it was then that she realized that she knew nothing of healing, nothing of taking care of the wounded. Her ineptitude birthed a burning anger within her.

"Hiccup? Hiccup, can you hear me?"

Her frantic calls did reach him, as evidence by the turning of his head towards her, the halfway opening of his eyes and the small upturn of the sides of his bloodied mouth.

"Hey," he said, and it was barely above a whisper, but she heard it. She laughed, relieved beyond words to find him still alive. She wiped her tears with the sleeve of her dress.

She turned back to her two remaining guards. "Get help," she ordered. "Find a doctor. Go, now!"

She half-expected to have to order them again after they refused to leave her alone, but the Commander gave her only a tight bow of the head before turning and starting rapid conversation with the other surviving guard as the two turned and began running down the hallway.

It was just the two of them now. Them two and a snowman among the bodies of the dead.

Her palms gently cupped his face. "Hiccup, please talk to me. You're gonna be okay. Just hang on."

The viking grumbled, making an attempt to sit up straighter before abandoning it with a pained grunt. If nothing else, he seemed to be fully regaining consciousness.

"... hurts," he said through grit teeth.

"Knives tend to, yes," she replied, tone dry for a moment. Her gaze lingered on the metal stuck on his arm. "Should I 'e| remove them?"

He gave a shake of his head. "No, or I might 'e| bleed out before help gets here."

"Is there anything I can do? How can I help?"

"Help me 'e| sit straight."

Gently, Elsa placed one hand on the armpit of his good arm and the other around his back, helping him sit up better. She noted that the knife that was stuck in his palm was Hiccup's own dagger.

"It looks worse than it is," he said after another grunt of pain. "I'll live."

Elsa's relief at his words was almost palpable. She had to wipe the welled up tears once again at the same time as another laugh escaped her lips. Her hands were painted red, Shad's blood mixing with Hiccup's.

He wheezed, gurgling for a second or two, before gathering his strength enough to speak again. "It was 'e| the Divisive. He ambushed me."

That made sense, even if it made Elsa purse her lips in quiet fury. If it wasn't her, and it wasn't Shad, that only left one remaining option.

"Is he 'e|?"

"Dead," Hiccup said. He spoke slowly and with difficulty. His breaths were short and rugged. "He would've gotten me but 'e| your snowman

saved me."

"Olaf did?" Elsa asked, looking at the sentient pile of snow with wide, surprised eyes. He beamed under her look, even if he turned away in embarrassment.

"He nailed him with a snowball. Great aim, that one. You should've seen it, it was—" his speech was interrupted by another hacking cough, a sign that he was overworking himself. Elsa put a soothing hand on his chest and another on his shoulder.

"It was brilliant," he concluded.

"I'm glad you're alive," Elsa said, finding no better words, none more sincere, to say.

Another soft smile graced his lips, looking quite macabre on his bloody face. "Thanks."

Ignoring the red sheen on her hands, she took gentle hold of his face and planted a kiss on his lips, as soft as she could make it. The taste of blood was irrelevant to her need to profess her relief and happiness at his survival.

Hiccup laughed into her lips; a soft, wheezing sound. She stopped when she felt him tense from another stab of pain, and pulled back.

His gaze landed somewhere behind her and his smile vanished, replaced by a look of pain. Just as Elsa was starting to worry that his condition was getting worse, he spoke.

"I saw what the General did. I'm sorry. I was wrong about him."

Her hands trembled again as another wave of anguish hit her, but she fought it down, anchoring herself to Hiccup's presence next to her.

"Remember when you told me about your father's passing, Hiccup?" she asked.

He gave a weak nod. "Yes."

"Do you do you think Shad might have felt the same? He wasn't my father, but—"

"I'm sure the old guy could think of—" A grunt of pain, quickly overcome. "Could think of no end more fitting than trading his life for yours. Parenting is on the mind and actions, after all. Not just blood."

Elsa contemplated his words in silence, broken only by his occasional wheeze or bloody cough.

Help arrived soon, more guards flooding the corridor and several doctors making their appearance, some with already bloodied aprons and hands, signifying that they'd already been at work earlier.

Elsa had to leave Hiccup's side so the doctors could have space to

work. His eyes searched her for a frantic second as she rose to her feet and backed away.

"I won't be far," she assured him. He said nothing, focusing on answering the doctor's questions as they set about removing the knives and treating his wounds.

Elsa turned towards the carnage from earlier, seeing several servants carefully wrapping the bodies and carrying them away.

A doctor walked up to her. "We'll have to move the Chief, but to a room on this level. I'd rather avoid taking him through stairs to the hospital ward."

Elsa gave a curt nod. "There's plenty of suitable rooms. The drawing room in the next corridor should have enough open space for you to work."

The doctor thanked her and returned to his fellows. As the healers carefully carried her viking lover away, Elsa close behind, her mind turned to other matters.

Her Commander of the guards had returned to her side, waiting for orders. She turned to him.

"I want to know exactly what's going on in the castle and what happened. Get me reports from all levels."

"Yes, my Queen." Her orders were relayed to several lower ranked officers who left, looking for regional commanders and squad officers to gather as full a picture as they could and report back.

She followed the doctors into the drawing room, but maintained a respectful distance, mindful of getting in their way. Hiccup cursed and made plenty of scathing remarks, but he was otherwise a cooperative patient with a surprisingly high tolerance for pain, from what the medics would say. Elsa tried not to watch the proceedings exactly, seeing sharp scalpels and wads of string and blood basically everywhere, but she still wanted to be nearby.

On the other side of the makeshift surgery, Elsa received the reports from her officers as they eventually returned. It was the Commander who stepped forth to talk to her.

"Speak."

"It was a coordinated attack," the Commander said. "At some unknown signal earlier today, several of the guards revealed themselves to be traitors, surprised the gate garrison and allowed access into the castle to several brigands. Fighting erupted throughout the lower levels."

Elsa frowned. "Was their force strong enough to potentially capture the castle?"

The old soldier shook his head. "Not that we noted, your Majesty. Even with the sudden treachery of several of our number and the confusion it caused, we were able to rally and the engagements turned in our favor. We eventually cornered them and got the upper hand. Most of them are dead, though some surrendered when defeat became

obvious."

"What was their objective, then, if not the takeover of the castle?"

"I would hazard a guess that they were planning on precision strikes against key figures in our administration."

It took but a moment for Elsa to understand his meaning. If they wanted to reach and kill the priority targets, then that meant

"Where is Anna?" she demanded, the beginnings of panic making her chest feel constricted.

"The princess was on the second level at the time the attack began. Majority of the fighting occurred around her position. From what we managed to gather, the group sent after the princess comprised of most the enemy forces that weren't sent after you."

"Is my sister alright? Where is she? Tell me!"

"The Princess is safe, my Queen. Despite the ferocity of the enemy in trying to reach her, they could not get past the dragon."

Elsa blinked in confusion. "The dragon?"

He nodded, and Elsa didn't miss the sheen of disbelief and wonder in his eyes. "Yes. Chief Haddock's dragon arrived almost as soon as the fighting began, and it seemed very intent on guarding the Princess. Rather successfully, I might add. Without it, we might not have rallied in time to save her."

Elsa directed grateful eyes at Hiccup, but he was still lying on the makeshift operating table. Though the operation itself seemed to be over, he was still having a hushed and rather tense conversation with the one doctor that still remained by his side. Bandages lined most of his torso, and his injured hand had been wrapped in a sling.

In lieu of thanking Hiccup directly, Elsa turned back to her commander.

"Him," she noted.

"My Queen?"

"The dragon is a he," Elsa clarified at her subject's confused look, "and his name is Toothless. Remember this, Commander."

He bowed his head. "Of course, your Majesty. Many will thank the majestic beast before tonight is through for helping save the Princess. Toasts will be had in his honor."

Elsa nodded. "You mentioned different groups of assailants?"

He nodded, grave expression returning. "The largest number of intruders tried to make their way to the upper levels. No doubt attempting to reach you, your Majesty. They were intercepted at the stairway, where the fiercest fight was had. The second largest group, as I mentioned, went after the princess. Several smaller squads went

after other members of the council and members of your administration."

The feeling of dread and resignation returned. "What are our losses?"

"The biggest hits seem, until further notice, to be the loss of the Commander General and the Minister of Finance. Unfortunately, we could not save the Minister."

Elsa remembered the portly merchant who had served as her financial advisor for years. His loss would be greatly felt. Her hands clenched.

"Who else?"

"Lady Elai is injured, but stable. None of the other major targets perished, but the number of royal guards lost has reached twenty on last count, and is expected to go higher as more information seeps in."

So much death. So much treachery and senseless loss of life. And for what?

"Thank you, Commander," she had the wherewithal to say. "Is there anything else?"

"Not for the moment, but we are still working on learning as much as we can."

"Report back to me as soon as you have anything new."

"It will be done, your Majesty."

He bowed before turning on his heels and exiting the drawing room. Many guards were standing watch just outside. Elsa knew they must have been at least a full squad. No one wanted to risk anything with danger so recent.

Elsa let out a sigh as she rubbed her eyes. She made her way to a basin filled with lukewarm water that had been brought in. She'd already cleaned most of the blood off her hands and face with a towel earlier, but now that she had a few minutes of quiet she could use the water for a more thorough job. There was no saving her dress, though.

The water felt cool against her skin, and it seemed to wash away weariness as well as blood. She let out a heavy breath as she dried her face with another clean towel.

Her gaze eventually landed on Hiccup, still resting on the makeshift table the doctors had made for him. It seemed like the operation was complete, as even the last doctor had left. It was just the two of them now.

She walked up to him and kneeled next to his form, taking hold of his good hand.

"Hey," he greeted her.

"Hey," she said in reply. Not a greeting she used often, but it would do. "How are you feeling?"

He grimaced. The doctors had done good work cleaning him so they could work, but there was still blood in his hair. His ruined tunic had been cut up and removed. A fresh one lay next to him, folded, awaiting use. For the moment, Hiccup was clad only with bandages from the waist up.

"Better," he said. "Worse in a way, but better. I'm no longer numb so it stings more, but that's a good sign."

"I'm glad."

"More importantly â€| how are you?"

Elsa shook her head. "It's still early. Too much. I can't think about the lost right now. I can't afford to. There's a lot of things to deal with first."

His lips pursed in a thin line.

"I â€| understand." It was obvious that he didn't like it, but he did not disagree.

"I was told Toothless protected Anna."

Hiccup smiled now, the first smile she'd seen from him since this whole debacle started. "I'm glad to hear Anna is okay."

"Did you send Toothless?"

He nodded. "As soon as we heard the commotion start, I sent Toothless straight to her. I was making my way to find you when I was ambushed by the Divisive. He â€| overcame me."

The grimace on his face had nothing to do with the pain from his injuries, if Elsa had to hazard a guess.

"You were still healing from your previous injuries, were you not?"

"That is no excuse."

"You're being too hard on yourself, as usual."

"But-"

"Thank you," Elsa interrupted him. At his confused look, she went on to clarify. "For sending Toothless to save Anna. For separating with him at such a crucial time, just for our sake. For risking your life to save mine."

"I couldn't help you, in the end."

"You don't always have to, Hiccup. I'm alive. I'm here."

His hand in hers tightened, almost imperceptibly.

"That's all that matters," he said.

Elsa wasn't sure where the conversation would go from there, but she was trying to figure out the best way to kiss him without aggravating any of his many wounds when the doors to the drawing room were flung open.

Tension broken, both turned their heads to the entrance. There, the dragon Toothless was trying his best to fit through the door, succeeding after a few seconds of effort, and covered the distance between the door and Hiccup's bed in one jump.

Even Elsa, who was not familiar with the dragon, could make out the very clear worry in his mannerisms and frantic behavior. While Hiccup spoke to it in soft, soothing tones, Elsa examined a curiosity on it. The dragon was no longer fully black and, upon closer inspection, Elsa realized that there were great lines of fabric wrapped around its torso, held in place by tightly secured leather belts.

The dragon had been injured, she realized. This makeshift dressing was probably the result of her doctors and maybe even veterinarians trying to help him. Elsa's stomach tightened at the view. The area around his wound had been cleaned, but Toothless' head still carried dried blood all over it. Most of his limbs were painted red, too. Elsa refused to let it bother her, not when the dragon had become like this saving her sister.

Toothless had been suitably calmed a couple of minutes later and settled himself on the ground next to Hiccup, his crouching form still taller than he was on his makeshift bed. Hiccup's good hand had been repurposed to patting his friend between the eyes.

"Hiccup," she called gently, getting his attention. "I need to go. I want you to stay here and rest, alright?"

His brow furrowed into the beginnings of a frown. "Perhaps I should-"

"No," she cut him off, voice level but firm. "You've done enough, Hiccup. I want you to stay here and rest. Promise me."

He seemed like he wanted to argue, but he didn't. After a few seconds of deliberation, he gave her a nod, lips pursed. Smart man.

"I'll be back later," she promised. "Get well soon."

She left the impromptu hospital room. Now that even the last remaining pockets of fighting had concluded, it was time to get back on top of the situation.

Her guards around her at all times, Elsa toured the castle, inspecting the damage and overseeing relief efforts. The dead had been gathered, traitors separated from the loyal, and being cared for by the appropriate people. Most of the outsider invaders had been identified as Grandlandians. Their birthplace did not necessarily implicate the nation itself, but the chances of the country not being involved were minimal at best.

News from the city outside the castle were flooding in, too. The citizenry of Arendelle was horrified that the castle had been under attack yet overjoyed at the survival of the Queen. The prevalent

emotion right now seemed to be open shows of support for her and rather loud calls of vengeance. The guards of the castle were all natives of Arendelle, with families of their own. Such a strike would not be forgotten nor forgiven easily. Elsa was inclined to agree with her subjects in this.

Even several hours later, however, they were still struggling to piece together a proper timeline of events, and new information continued to trickle to Elsa as the various teams completed their investigations.

The Commander found her in the hospital ward, as Elsa was about to leave from visiting the wounded. With a jerk of her head, he followed her outside into the corridor. The guards gave them some space.

"What news, Commander?"

"Bad ones, I'm afraid."

"Go on."

"A few of the invaders managed to escape in the commotion of the fighting. It took us a while to understand exactly what happened, but we have eyewitnesses of the city confirming several men escaping into the streets with horses, and then out of the city."

"What efforts are being made for their capture?"

"We've sent messenger birds, my Queen. With the army in motion in the borders and nearby cities, they should not get far unless they abandon the horses and hide in the mountains. Even there, we should find them."

The nervousness in the grizzled soldier's expression made her think there was more. "What else?"

"We just got word from Madam Gertrude. The men that escaped, they were part of a smaller team that went after the servants. When they escaped, they took someone with them. A hostage."

Elsa's eyes widened slowly. "Who did they take?" she asked, even though she feared that she already knew the answer.

"A young lad by the name of Arnod Sherner," the Commander replied. "I'm not sure what they hoped to accomplish or what their goal was, but -"

"Save it," she cut him, thoughts racing. "I know why they took him."

They'd taken Ernie. Poor, young Ernie. He'd spent most of his life living and working in the castle. So helpful, friendly and earnest that it'd taken the newly arrived Chief Haddock a single look to instantly decide that he'd befriend the boy.

Elsa did no doubt that it was exactly that friendship that made him the target of this kidnapping. Their adversaries could not have been more transparent if they'd left a taunting calling card behind.

Elsa turned to the older man, jaw set. "We need to find them, and get him back," she bit out. "Do you hear me? We can not allow one of our own to be subjected to kidnapping and God knows what else. Send teams after them. I want Ernie back here in time for breakfast tomorrow. Am I clear?"

The Commander seemed troubled. "My Queen, I understand that every single life is valuable, but to expend such military effort for one servant boy at such a crucial time seems—"

"That's an order Commander. Arnod Sherner, like everyone in Arendelle, is under my protection and I will not abandon him. Relay the orders immediately."

"Yes, your Majesty!"

As the Commander of the guards hurried away, Elsa tried to figure out a solution to the current mess. What would she do? Ernie was gone, in a clear attempt to draw out Hiccup, whose friendship with the servant boy was not exactly a secret. It was a smart move on their behalf, Elsa had to agree. Of all the people they could use as leverage, Ernie was the only one not heavily guarded.

What did she do now? Did she tell Hiccup? Surely not. Her viking lover, God bless his soul, was courageous and brave and had a noble streak a mile long. He'd no doubt walk right into whatever trap their enemy planned to spring on him by using Ernie as bait.

On the other hand though, did she have the right to keep the knowledge from him? Ernie was his friend, much more so than the boy was hers, who'd only spoken to him infrequently and briefly. He deserved to know, especially if her people failed to save him. Furthermore, could she even hide it from him? The viking chief was smart, he'd soon look for his friend and realize that he was gone. Trying to hide it was probably not a wise course of actions.

Elsa didn't know what to do. After some deliberation, she resolved not to keep it from him for long, but to wait a bit for any potential news and for him to get better before springing such an awful surprise his way.

The rest of the evening went this way, with the castle and the city still reeling from attack. It was a miracle that Elsa managed to get any sleep at all that night, with all the matters vying for her attention, but manage it she did, collapsing to her bed for an exhausted slumber at an indeterminable time of night. She'd paid a visit to Hiccup before heading to her chambers but found him fast asleep, the dragon Toothless standing silent vigil next to his sleeping master.

She slept heavily, but not for long, and it was back to work the following day. Bathing and dressing were the only relaxed times of that morning, as she even had to have breakfast in her office, so little was her available time.

She visited Marina in the hospital room as the older woman recuperated. She convened with the merchant's guild regarding a potential replacement as both guild leader and financial advisor. She held a meeting of the military brass regarding the appointment of a new Commander General that led nowhere.

News still arrived from every corner of her kingdom, reactions and reports and queries and communiqües. Few of those were interesting, fewer still useful, but still she went through them all.

It was well past noon when she got her first bit of concrete news. Judging by the face of her Commander as he walked into her office, however, it probably wasn't good.

"What now, Commander?" She couldn't help the edge of frustration that leaked into her tone. If the older man minded, he didn't show it.

"Reports from the scouts came in, your Majesty. The escaped infiltrators were spotted."

"But not captured?"

"No, my Queen. They â€¢ they broke through the perimeter of the captured siege engineering facility, and are now hiding there, out of our reach."

This was definitely not going to make her budding headache any better. "How did they get in when the entire area was surrounded?"

The older man grimaced. "Our men did not expect an assault from outside the perimeter. The fiends surprised them and ran through before our people had time to group or react. On the positive side, at least now they can't get back out."

Elsa hardly considered that a plus. If her assumption on their plan was true, then it hardly mattered if they would run out of food in a few weeks or months. They would have achieved their goal long before that.

"Commander, how well informed are you on the situation regarding the captured facility and our troops in the area?"

Elsa knew that the man had been thrust into a position where he had to, momentarily at least, cover some of the duties of the late Mertok, which covered affairs from beyond the castle walls.

His lips pursed. "Well enough, my Queen. I have been monitoring the situation through field reports."

"Is there any way to launch a successful assault on the premises?"

He furrowed his brow, thinking it over for a minute.

"A successful assault would not be impossible," he allowed, "but assaulting such a heavily entrenched position would lead to catastrophic losses. Those war machines would tear our men apart before we could get close. Even with only a few dozen defenders, it would be a bloodbath."

Elsa feared as much. It had been mentioned before, but she had hoped something new might have come to light in the meantime.

She dismissed the Commander, staying alone with her thoughts, half dozen guards notwithstanding.

She had to tell Hiccup. He deserved to know, of that she was certain. The problem was that, if she knew the viking chief at all, he would try to do something rash, and this she could not allow. Deceiving him was surely not the right course of action though, was it? He would know soon enough that the youth was gone and that he wasn't dead, and he would demand answers that she would have to give, and that would damage his trust in her while also accomplishing nothing.

She had to tell him. She would. She would also make sure that he did not do anything stupid or crazy.

She made her way to the drawing room that served, even today, as Hiccup's impromptu quarters, seeing as he had not yet been cleared to go back to his assigned rooms in the above floors.

After instructing the guards to wait outside she knocked a couple times before letting herself in. She saw Hiccup still laying on his bed and gave him a smile as she came in and closed the door behind her. She moved towards him, accepting his greeting and offering one of her own.

She examined him critically. He looked better. Much better. He wasn't pale anymore, and he had washed and changed clothes. His arm was no longer in a sling but his injured hand was completely wrapped and immovable. Similarly, bandages were visible underneath the tunic he wore.

The illusion of good health was broken when he tried to move, sitting up and turning his body towards her. He didn't make a sound but she noticed the setting of his jaw and the slight tremble of his fingers at the strain on his shoulder. Even these simple movements were evidently painful.

She moved a chair next to his bed and sat.

"I came by yesterday," she said, "but you were already asleep."

"You should have woken me. I've slept too much as it is."

"I couldn't, you needed it."

"I would have liked to see you, though."

She gave him a smile at that.

"So, what's new on the outside world?"

She gave him a brief summary of all that he'd missed, at least the common knowledge stuff. The bodycount, the capturing of the infiltrators and the unmasking of traitors. She talked to him briefly about the captured facility outside of Arendelle.

And then, as she had decided to do, she told him about Ernie. She told him how the few escaping invaders had taken a hostage and run off with him. She told him that they had managed to unite with the occupants of the facility.

He listened to her without interrupting, even if his eyes widened and his fingers clenched at hearing about Ernie. When she was done, she sat in the silence and observed him, tense but patient. Hiccup's reaction was slightly different than what she'd expected. He had not exploded with questions or anger or tried to run off yet. Instead, he sat there, thinking, his brow furrowed. He took a minute or two to process her words, no doubt thinking everything over in the way that had so impressed her since she'd first met him, all those weeks ago.

"What's being done to retrieve him?" he asked her eventually, voice level and tightly controlled. Of course he would ask. He'd need all the information to make conclusions, Elsa had known that. But she knew that her answer would not satisfy him.

"The area is completely surrounded," she said. "Sooner or later, they will!"

She trailed off at seeing Hiccup shake his head.

"He'll be long dead by the time they run out of supplies, you know that."

Elsa did, but what could she say? "We cannot just storm the place. It's equipped with over a dozen war machines that would mow our soldiers down before they reached them."

"Any day we dally reduces the chances of Ernie surviving," he said as he brought his legs over and touched them on the ground. He was already wearing his prosthetic.

He turned to Toothless and gave a low whistle. The sleeping dragon's ears twitched, and his eyes opened slowly.

"Get up, bud. We're heading out." To emphasize his words, Hiccup got to his feet. He looked shaky for a second, but he controlled it and made to start walking.

Elsa was on her feet and had a hand on his chest before he could move.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Hiccup gave her a look as if she'd asked a stupid question.

"I'm going to go get Ernie back."

He made to walk around her, but she moved with him, blocking his way.

"What are you doing?" he echoed her.

"I can't let you go."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't need your permission."

"Hiccup, you can't go there. Those machines, they were created as a defense against dragons and there are over a dozen of those!"

"Thanks for that, by the way."

Elsa let out a growl of frustration. "You can be angry about that later. The point is, can't you see that this obviously a trap for you?"

"Of course it's a trap!" he yelled, making her freeze at the sudden change in volume. "Of course I know it's a trap!"

"Then why?!" she replied, her own tone rising to mirror his own.

He glared at her. "What choice do I have?" he said. "I can't just leave Ernie to rot. I have to go."

"You can't. You're injured."

"It doesn't matter!"

"You'll be shot out of the sky before you even land! What about Toothless?"

That seemed to give him pause for a bit and Elsa allowed herself to hope, but she realized that it was for naught when his jaw set in a show of determination.

"We'll think of something."

"Hiccup, listen-"

"No," he cut her off, placing his good hand on her shoulder, "you listen. Yes, flying over there is a terrible idea and yes, you can't in good conscience have your troops storm the place and get slaughtered. What about Ernie, then? Do we just leave him at their mercy and hope for the best?"

Elsa had no answer to this. She bit her bottom lip, averting her gaze downwards. He was right, wasn't he? Realistically, the best option would be to leave Ernie to his fate, considering that neither of the two rescue options ended well for anyone. But was that truly right?

"Ernie is in this position because of me," he continued, expression softening. "These people are trying to draw me out. If I don't go, they'll assume their reports were wrong and kill him. I can't let that happen. He is in danger that he didn't sign up for, that he was unaware he could be in for when he got to know me. I owe it to him to take responsibility."

"But-"

"Hush," he stopped her, tone gentle. "I want you to listen to me. If I don't make it back-"

What? "Hiccup-"

"_Listen_," he said, stopping her. "If I don't make it back, their attention will be focused entirely on you. I want you to do as I say and not as I do, and be careful. Their attack here will have both emboldened them and made them reckless. If you outmaneuver them just one more time, it will be over. The endgame is now."

"What about Berk?" she asked, looking up at him again. "What about your people? What will happen to them if you die?"

Hiccup pursed his lips, taking some time to formulate his reply. "I am where I am today because of who I am," he said eventually. "The people of Berk trust me because they know me. I would not be able to live with myself if I left Ernie to his fate, even if that means depriving Berk of my leadership. I would never be able to face myself or my subjects, knowing that I took the coward's way out and left him to die."

And wasn't he just hitting the bullseye again? He made a compelling argument, she had to admit. How would he consider himself worth leading if he abandoned his people just because the alternative put him at risk? An idealistic view, perhaps, but one that Elsa herself shared.

More importantly, however, Elsa realized that his words resonated with her to that degree because they also applied to her. Ernie was not a viking, he was her subject. His parents had entrusted him to the crown's care. He was not a combatant, he was not prepared to lay down his life for his Queen. And maybe he had been kidnapped to draw Hiccup out, but Hiccup himself was a target because he insisted on protecting her.

And if Hiccup was compelled enough to risk his life against such long odds for one of her own people, what did that say about her? Were her only choices really to either let her lover fight her own battle and probably die in the process, or to let a civilian under her protection die because it was more convenient?

Neither, she realized. Neither of the two options were acceptable. She would have to take responsibility and stop hiding.

Hiccup shook her out of her musings with a gentle shake. Her eyes returned to him, her own hands gently touching the hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry to put you through this," he said, a sad smile on his lips. "But I have to go."

"No," she argued. "You don't."

"Elsa?" His tone was confused. Alarmed. He looked down and his eyes widened as he took in the ice slowly climbing up his feet, locking them in place.

Her hands holding his were doing the same, spreading ice over it that slowly moved to his elbow before proceeding over his chest.

"Hey, stop this!"

She refused to let him walk into an ambush designed specifically for him in his heavily injured condition. Even if he were fully healthy, she would not.

"I'm sorry, Hiccup. But this is not your fight."

"No Elsa, don't do this! Please, just listen—" he pleaded as he

struggled to free himself from her ice. It was useless, however, as it had already taken his limbs, spreading over his torso and reaching all the way to his neck.

"Forgive me."

She kissed him, then, her lips doing their best to communicate her feelings to him in a way that words failed to, even as she poured her magic through them, feeling the warmth of his lips fade to the cool sensation of ice over several seconds.

When she opened her eyes and leaned back, Hiccup was completely frozen in a block of ice, good hand reaching for her but unable to move from inside its prison.

Elsa looked at him for a few seconds, regretting having to do this and doing this sort of thing to him, before turning her eyes to the dragon Toothless.

She was fully prepared to freeze him, too, if the Night Fury jumped to the defense of his master. Her magic was ready, waiting only for her command to spring forward. At such close quarters Toothless could not jump straight at her without harming Hiccup, and he could not maneuver fast enough to dodge her rays of frost.

Such vigilance proved unnecessary, however. Toothless was still laying down, one paw over the other, though he was watching the proceedings with narrowed eyes, lowered ear flaps and obviously tense muscles.

Still, the big black dragon had made no move, only watching her even as she froze Hiccup and took some steps away from him.

She regarded the mythical beast for a few seconds, their gazes meeting. Elsa was not sure to what degree the dragon could understand her, but she knew he was intelligent, that he loved Hiccup as much if not more so than she, and that she owed a lot to him. Least of all, her trust.

"Watch over him," she whispered to the dragon. "He will not understand."

Toothless gave no indication of assent or otherwise, continuing to follow her with his green eyes. After a few seconds of this stalemate, Elsa averted her gaze. She gave one last look to Hiccup's frozen form before heading to the door.

Outside, she met her guards.

"You," she said, pointing to one of them, who immediately straightened. "Find the Commander of the guards. Tell him to have the perimeter around the captured siege works facility tightened and ready to move in at my command. Let him know that no one is to follow me unless specifically ordered to do so."

"You're going somewhere, your Majesty?"

Only to fulfill her duty. Elsa's lips formed a thin line. "Go," she ordered. The man hastened to bow and obey, leaving down the corridor.

"The rest of you," she said, addressing the nearly dozen guards arrayed around her. "Stay in front of this door and guard it with your lives. Let no one inside."

"Your Majesty," one began, "we need to-"

"These are your orders," she cut him off with a glare. "And you will obey. Is that clear?"

They all bowed, giving her shouted assents. Satisfied, Elsa gave them a nod and walked away, now alone.

She headed downwards to ground level. People greeted her as she passed, servants and guards and officers and civilians, and she greeted back, giving no indication of what she was about to do as she headed for the royal stables.

On the way, a single thought sent frost over her body, covering her dress and transforming it into the sparkling white one she liked so much. Her circlet lay secured on her head, proof of her station and nobility.

She would not let Hiccup attempt to save one of her own people in his injured condition. She also refused to leave Ernie to die without doing something. She would not send her soldiers on a suicidal march against war machines she should have known better than to have built.

It took only a single order for the stable master to prepare her horse for her; a beautiful, white specimen of the finest, sturdiest breed.

She would not play to her enemy's hands. She refused to play their game by their rules. She would not relinquish her viking lover to their hands, and she would not wait idly in her castle for them to finally be ready to kill her. Long had they been a thorn in her side while she stayed in her tower and relayed orders. Too long had they prodded her, testing her reactions and defenses while she preached restraint and mercy. Too long had they threatened the stability and people of her kingdom. She would abide by it no longer.

She had just settled her dress and mounted her horse when Anna appeared, running into the stable and coming to a skidding halt next to her.

"Elsa!" the redhead shouted, unable to say anymore as she fought to catch her breath. "I heard from the Commander. What do you think you're doing?"

Elsa could not bear to look at her sister. Instead, she took hold of the reins, and gently prodded the horse, preparing it.

"What a queen must," she replied, before letting out a loud exclamation and prodding the white stallion harder. The horse whinnied and rose to its hind legs for a few seconds before beginning his run, already building up to a full gallop.

Anna's shouts went ignored and soon could no longer be heard. People hastily moved out of her way on the castle bridge, then Arendelle's

main road as she headed outside her capital and towards the occupied installation.

For the first time, the Snow Queen would ride out, and her enemies would rue the day they thought to challenge her within her own domain.

~E~

End
file.